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An Assessment of Seat Belt Use

by Tuscaloosa Firefighters

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

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Abstract

The problem was that failure of Tuscaloosa Fire & Rescue Service firefighters to wear seat belts could result in injury or death if they were involved in a vehicle crash. The purpose of this applied research project was to determine if Tuscaloosa firefighters wear a seat belt in emergency vehicles and to make recommendations to overcome any obstacles to compliance.

This research answered three questions. First, what are the seat belt practices of Tuscaloosa firefighters? Second, what are the attitudes of Tuscaloosa firefighters regarding the use of seat belts in department vehicles? Third, what are the perceived obstacles to seat belt use in department vehicles?

This is a descriptive research project. Procedures included a literature review, interviews, an analysis of department records and a survey instrument completed by line personnel. Results were that not all Tuscaloosa firefighters are properly buckled up while on-duty, most often on emergency runs. The decision-making was based on a sense of urgency.

Recommendations included reintroducing the personal accountability portion of the seat belt policy and renewing TFRS commitment to enforcing the policy. In addition, the department should develop a strategy for changing the safety culture to one of arriving safely as the top priority.

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Introduction

Wearing a seat belt is the single most effective way to prevent death and serious injury in a motor vehicle accident (MVA), according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA, 2010). The NHTSA reported that in 2009 alone, the use of seat belts saved an estimated 12,713 lives of occupants five and older. Encouragingly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2010) states that seat belt use in the United States is on the rise. Laws, education and technology have increased seat belt use from 11% in 1981 to nearly 85% in 2010. Yet, firefighters, both paid and volunteer, buckle up less often than the general public. In a November 2003 poll by Firehouse.com, more than 11,000 people responded to a question about seat belts. Forty-five percent answered they don't wear seat belts all the time when responding to an emergency. In a follow-up poll in April of that year, 36% of 8,000 people reported that they do not wear them.

Because firefighters do not always buckle up, many die in a line of duty death (LODD) each year. The National Fire Protection Association's (NFPA) report, *U.S. Firefighter Fatalities in the United States - 2009*, states that each year approximately 100 firefighters suffer a LODD. Since 1984, MVAs have been the second leading cause at 20- to 25-percent and only one-fourth of those were in a privately-owned vehicle. The majority were not wearing seat belts at the time of the collision. Preventable deaths where seat belts were not worn continue to occur each year.

The problem is that failure of Tuscaloosa Fire & Rescue Service firefighters to wear seat belts could result in injury or death if they are involved in a vehicle crash. This reduces the

department's ability to achieve its mission. The mission statement of the Tuscaloosa Fire & Rescue Service is "Making Tuscaloosa a safer community through the highest quality of emergency response, risk reduction, and fiscal responsibility." The TFRS cannot fulfill this mission without a sincere commitment to firefighter safety. The long-term pain, suffering and expense to the victim, the family and the department under such circumstances would negatively affect department morale, finances, community relations and commitment to service. The safety of its firefighters must be the top priority in the response to any emergency.

The research purpose is to determine reasons why Tuscaloosa firefighters may not wear seat belts in emergency vehicles in order to reduce this risk. This research paper will conduct descriptive research to answer the questions: What do Tuscaloosa firefighters know relative to wearing seat belts in emergency vehicles? What are the attitudes of Tuscaloosa firefighters regarding the use of seat belts in department vehicles? What are the perceived obstacles to seat belt use in department vehicles?

Background and Significance

The City of Tuscaloosa is in West Alabama on the Black Warrior River, 57 miles southwest of Birmingham. Tuscaloosa is the county seat of Tuscaloosa County, which also includes the municipalities of Northport and Brookwood. The town is approximately 56 square miles. In July 2009, the City's population was 93, 215, an increase of 19.7-percent since 2000. Tuscaloosa is served by three federal highways, three state highways and two interstates. The town is home to the main medical facility for all of west central Alabama and one of the busiest emergency departments in the state.

The Tuscaloosa Fire & Rescue Service (TFRS) is a career department employing 236 personnel protecting life, property and the environment through direct involvement in fire prevention, firefighting, emergency medical care, water rescue, technical rescue, hazardous materials mitigation, disaster response, public education, airport rescue, and community service. In March 2011, the ranks included 128 basic EMTs, four intermediate EMTs and 80 paramedics. The TFRS jurisdiction for fire response is the 215 square-mile police jurisdiction. The TFRS jurisdiction for EMS calls includes all of Tuscaloosa County with exception of the City of Northport. Eleven neighborhood stations include ten Basic Life Support (BLS) engine companies and two Advanced Life Support (ALS) engine companies. Three rescue trucks are staged in strategic areas of the city. According to the 2010 Mayor's Report, the TFRS responded to 13,380 calls for emergency assistance in 2010; 785 were for fire emergencies.

The Alabama Fallen Firefighter Memorial records 14 LODDs in the history of the TFRS. A review of department injury and fatality records revealed that two were killed during a fire suppression incident, nine died from cardiac arrest, three died from smoke-related respiratory diseases and one died during a training exercise.

In October of 2010, the TFRS was one of only seven Alabama fire departments with 100% compliance in the recently-renamed International First Responder Seatbelt Pledge sponsored by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. This project honors the life of firefighter Brian Hunton and encourages firefighters to wear seat belts. Hunton, age 27, had been a member of the Amarillo (Texas) Fire Department for only one year when he was killed while enroute to a fire. The Texas State Fire Marshal's investigation of the fatality found that he was not wearing his seat belt while putting on SCBA when the door adjacent to his seat opened and he fell out of the apparatus. He died two days later from his injuries. The investigation further

reported that none of the personnel on the apparatus wore safety belts at the time of the accident, the safety belt system on the apparatus was not functioning and at least one seat sensor was disabled (2005). Despite the explicit and public commitment of signing this memorial commitment, the writer observed that Tuscaloosa firefighters do not always wear a seat belt. When asked about this discrepancy, the response was that it is more important to arrive on the scene quickly than it is to be belted in. This attitude is strongly in line with the traditional safety culture addressed by many leaders in the U.S. fire service.

Dr. Burton Clark, management science program chair at the National Fire Academy, and founder of the pledge, believes that the seat belt culture of the fire service is dangerous. In his Firehouse.com article, *Leadership: We killed firefighter Brian Hunton*, he states that although changing the fire service safety culture is a big challenge, it is the right thing to do. He urges fire departments to adopt seat belt rules and impose consequences – zero tolerance – to help people conform (2006).

In 2008, Chief Gregory B. Cade, U.S. Fire Administrator took this issue one step further when he asked “what part of the mission of the fire service is so important that we allow firefighters to travel without being securely buckled into their seats?” He challenged the culture that personal safety should be ignored when firefighters are in a hurry, that risking their lives is somehow a part of their job. Instead, firefighters should consider their responsibilities to their families and the public, and operate vehicles in a manner that protects others from harm.

A related observation of the author was the understanding that the apparatus operator (AO) was responsible for ensuring compliance with the seat belt policy. The aforementioned informal survey revealed the commonly-held understanding that the TFRS seat belt policy states that the AO is responsible for making sure everyone is buckled up before the engine rolls. In a

related interview of TFRS deputy chiefs, neither could recall the policy ever stating that the AO was responsible, but were familiar with that belief. These potential contradictions imply that a firefighter could sign the pledge without a change of attitude or behavior. The department may be facing what Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2002) described in their book, *Leadership on the Line*, as an adaptive challenge. Adaptive challenge is defined as one that requires adjustments to the normal way things are done. The change must be seen as more acceptable than the status quo. Tuscaloosa firefighters are at increased risk of injury or death if they are involved in a motor vehicle accident because they are not wearing seat belts.

This applied research project relates directly to several areas in the coursework for the National Fire Academy (NFA) course, *Executive Leadership (EL)*, R125 (2005). Specifically, *Unit 12: Influencing Styles* correlates directly to this project. In this unit, the class used previous class work to explore using one's influence to educate and involve a person so that the other person wants the same thing you want. "The style relies heavily on logical arguments, getting the facts and marshaling the evidence" (NFA, 2005, p. SM 12-4).

This effort relates to and supports the United States Fire Administration's (USFA) first operational objective to reduce the loss of firefighter's lives and the third operational objective, to appropriately respond in a timely manner to an emergent issue (USFA, 2003).

Literature Review

The literature review contained both fire service and non-fire service sources. Its intent was to summarize research findings of others related to the research problem. It began with a summary of seat belts laws relative to firefighters in the United States, in Alabama and in Tuscaloosa. It focused on how frequently seat belts are used by the general public in the United

States and identified some of the tools proven effective to encourage this practice. Furthermore, the research concentrated on fire service recommendations to encourage compliance.

Seat belt laws affecting firefighters vary, depending on the locality. The current Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration exempts occupants of fire trucks and other rescue vehicles while involved in emergency and related operations from wearing seat belts (2009). In the Code of Alabama, Section 32-5B-4, the only exemptions from wearing a seat belt are rural mail carriers, and persons in vehicles made before 1965 or vehicles that normally operate in reverse (2007).

The Tuscaloosa Municipal Code requires all employees riding in city-owned vehicles to wear proper seat belts (2010). Additionally, in 2006, the TFRS adopted *Standard Operating Procedure 04-06-14, Vehicle Operating Policy, Section 8, Riding Policy*, which requires all personnel (emergency and/or non-emergency) to be seated and belted in an approved riding position whenever the vehicle is in motion. This policy includes all seats in the vehicle.

Apparatus operators are responsible to ensure passengers are seated and in place. All vehicle riders are individually and personally responsible for the proper use of seat belts. This is in accordance with National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standard 1500, which requires all persons riding in a fire apparatus be seated and belted when the vehicle is in motion. It further states that seat belts shall not be loosened or released for any purpose while the vehicle is moving. This includes donning respiratory protection equipment or protective clothing (2002).

In a March 13, 2011 interview, Deputy Chief George White (Administration) stated there are no documented instances of disciplinary action in the TFRS resulting from failure to follow the seat belt policy. In a March 15, 2011 interview with Deputy Chief Ken Horst (Operations), it was confirmed that he had received no notice of considered disciplinary action for this failure.

A study on ways to increase seat belt use as reported in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2001) found strong evidence that a combination of three interventions was most effective: public awareness of a seat belt law in combination with a perceived risk of detection and punishment (p.50).

Research conducted by the NHSTA (September, 2010), also concluded that a combination of laws, education, and technology have increased seat belt use from 11% in 1981 to nearly 85% in 2010. States with the most significant and steady increase in compliance have primary seat belt laws, which allow police officers to pull over drivers and issue tickets just because the drivers – or their passengers – aren't wearing seat belts. States with primary seat belt laws, including Alabama, have an 88-percent compliance rate compared to 79-percent in secondary states.

Failure of firefighters to wear seat belts is not a new concern. A 1956 issue of *Fire Engineering* magazine carried the article, "Seat belts may prove a solution to the problem of reducing fire department injuries" that suggested the life-saving potential of this practice. Similar stories about laws and technology pepper fire science journals and books since that time.

The literature clearly shows a history of firefighter deaths resulting from failure to wear seat belts, despite technology, policies and enforcement. What then is the underlying cause of this reluctance to take the time to buckle up?

Bill Manning, Communications Director for the NFFF, says the disconnect occurs on the basic level of safety culture – a complacent mentality. This is often expressed as "we have always done it this way." People behave in an unsafe manner because they have never been hurt before while performing their job that way. Once that behavior is engrained, it becomes a "tradition" and is, therefore, in the best interest of the organization. In order to establish a new

safety culture, Manning believes that handing down a new policy will not do the trick. Rather, the firefighter must be convinced that buckling up is in the best interest of the department. This buy-in will foster and promote a change in attitude.

With this change in mind, the NFFF, along with the United States Fire Administration (USFA) held the first Firefighter Life Safety Summit in 2004. The purpose of the Summit was to produce an agenda of initiatives with the goal of reducing LODDs by 25%. The first initiative, which is to define and advocate the need for a cultural safety change within the fire service, looks beyond rules and regulations to the need to change the thought process that urgency justifies risk. Simply put, firefighters cannot save lives or property unless they arrive safely (p.12). The following year, the second in a series of mini-summit meetings was conducted at the Fire Department Instructors Conference in Indianapolis on April 13. The purpose was to involve fire instructors in promoting firefighter safety because many professional values are introduced and become deeply rooted through training. The issue of a change in safety culture was consistently identified as a critical factor in keeping firefighters safe. One recommendation was to challenge instructors to stress the importance of following safety standards and regulations every time, and not ignoring them when they see them as a hindrance to their mission. This sense of responsibility should be presented as a fundamental fire service value; thinking “any risk is acceptable in an emergency” is not acceptable.

In a Psychology Today article, leadership expert Dr. Aubrey C. Daniels said that leaders that don't understand human behavior will not be successful in safety initiatives (2009). The key is to convince employees that they cannot fulfill the mission of their employer if they act in an unsafe manner. Teaching employees to work safely, rather than simply being safe, should be the goal of leadership in this area.

The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), in partnership with the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA), developed a safe driving program titled *IAFC policies and procedures for emergency vehicle safety* that was released in October 2006. This comprehensive guide points out that apparatus crashes do more than damage vehicles. They harm the public and firefighters, create serious liability issues, raise insurance premiums and may even subject a firefighter to criminal charges. Citing this and similar studies in the report, “*Fire Fighter Fatality Investigation and Prevention Program*,” the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH) concluded that seat belts are the most effective means of reducing injuries in MVAs and that all firefighters riding in emergency fire apparatus should be wearing secure seat belts (2008). This recommendation expands to place additional responsibility upon drivers of fire apparatus for operating in an unsafe manner. An interesting take on this recommendation is that mandatory driver training should be provided twice a year, and the training should include seat belts. This ties in well with the earlier mention of integrating a new safety culture into all training topics. Additionally, NIOSH works with the occupational safety and health community to develop a National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA) to improve worker safety and health. NORA Public Safety Sub-Sector Strategic Goal 3 is to require the use of seat belts by all occupants in moving fire service vehicles by 2010 (2009).

Two earlier ARPs were reviewed for their findings. Ted DeMar’s “*Analysis of seat belt use in the Watertown fire department*” concluded that the firefighters do not always buckle up and, moreover, have a great deal of misinformation on the value of seat belts. His conclusion was that a seat belt policy is an important part of the solution, but an adaptive change is the real challenge. William R. Davis conducted a similar study for the Albany, New York fire department with the conclusion that although the firefighters were very well informed on the

serious risk of non-compliance, many still refrained from wearing seat belts when making an urgent response. The literature review concludes that seat belts save lives and increased compliance among the public is linked to primary enforcement laws. Conversely, firefighters are less likely to buckle up than the general population, leading to about one-quarter of all LODDs. Current standards that govern the behavior of Tuscaloosa firefighters clearly require them to be properly restrained in a seat belt whenever the vehicle is in motion. There are no exceptions.

Leaders in the fire service have been concerned about seat belt safety for decades. In recent years, the national fire service institutions have taken significant strides in changing the safety culture that endorses risky behavior as a trade-off for a quicker response to an emergency. This resulted in tools and guidelines to encourage compliance.

One simple recommendation of the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) in the document, *Fire Department Vehicle Safety, Emergency and Non-Emergency Response, and Safe Emergency Operations on Roadways*, is to require the company officer and driver of the vehicle to confirm with a vocal response from each rider that all personnel and riders are on-board, properly attired, with seat belts on, before the vehicle is permitted to move. This recommendation would require no additional technology or policies. It seems like a basic system of accountability for oneself and others.

The literature review influenced this project in several ways. The debate over the value of seat belts to protect firefighters is nothing new to the fire service. Risk awareness, enhanced rules and technological advancements have not overcome the mindset that arriving quickly is more important than personal safety. Changing the safety culture of the fire service may be the best course for influencing change in seat belt behavior among firefighters.

Procedures

This applied research project (ARP) used descriptive research to study the present situation and recommend a course of action to reduce risk factors.

The first part of the project was a literature review of a selection of Internet sources, including government documents and periodicals, journal articles and sources from the World Wide Web. The researcher used several search engines, including google.com, ask.com and dogpile.com. Key words used for web research included “firefighter seat belt,” “firefighter safety belt,” “seat belt laws,” “seat belt statistics,” and related terms. Research also included interviews with TFRS deputy chiefs, a review of department records and a review of archived applied research projects (ARPs), books, journals and reports in the Learning Resource Center of the National Fire Academy in October 2010.

The second part of the project was distributing an assessment instrument for station personnel to complete while on duty (Appendix A). The tool was developed by the author and approved by Alan J. Martin, Fire Chief for the City of Tuscaloosa (Appendix B). It was distributed to by battalion chiefs to all 220 line personnel in their assigned station. Participation was voluntary. The completion period began January 14, 2011, and concluded January 24, 2011 when completed surveys were returned to the writer.

The purpose of the assessment instrument was to conduct original research on the attitudes and behaviors of Tuscaloosa firefighters regarding seat belt use in order to answer the three research questions. The instrument was composed of ten declarative statements. Responders could choose “agree” if they agreed with the statement or “disagree” if they disagreed. Responders were also asked to identify their rank from a list of four choices. The choice of “Other” was included to accommodate persons stepped-up into a higher rank. Raw data

was entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (Appendix C) and the results tallied in a simple table (Appendix D). Additional comments written on the assessment were recorded in a list (Appendix E).

Results

The literature review reasons that seat belts save lives and that the greatest level of compliance occurs in states with primary enforcement laws. This indicates that enforcement is a motivating factor. A Firehouse.com poll revealed that firefighters are less likely to buckle up than the typical citizen and that approximately one-quarter of all firefighter LODDs are linked to failure to buckle up. This disparity lends credence to the perception that many firefighters believe that arriving quickly at their own risk is acceptable. This indicates that the safety culture of the fire service may be in need of change. The literature review summarized positions on the needed culture change as expressed by a variety of notable organizations.

As stated in Background and Significance, the TFRS has taken important steps to develop policies and procedure to increase compliance with the seat belt policy. This was most recently demonstrated in the department's 100% compliance with the Brian Hutton Seat Belt Challenge. The goal of assessing all 220 line personnel in the survey instrument was limited due to sick leave, vacations, training, required time off and alternate duty, in addition to voluntary participation. A total of 139 surveys were completed for a 63% response rate. Eight identified their rank as "other." The remaining were 61 firefighters, 39 apparatus operators and 31 station officers.

Research Question 1: What do Tuscaloosa firefighters know relative to wearing seat belts in emergency vehicles? Questions one through four were related to knowledge of the TFRS seat belt policy and compliance with that policy. All but one of those participating reported that the

TFRS has a seat belt policy. This person may have misread the question, marked the wrong response or simply doesn't know there is a policy requiring them to wear a seat belt.

Fifteen members reported they did not wear a seat belt when responding to an emergency. Their ranks were nine firefighters, two apparatus operators, three station officers and three "other." Four reported they do not wear seat belts during routine on-duty travel. Their rank was one firefighter, two apparatus operators and one station officer. This is interesting as there is at least some non-compliance at all levels.

Self-reported compliance of 89% in Question 2 is significantly higher than the 55% compliance recorded in the November 2003 poll by Firehouse.com. This disparity may be the result of greater compliance or the result of a reluctance to be completely honest in the survey. It may also reflect a different mindset among career firefighters. This result was surprising since 100% of the department signed a pledge to always buckle up whenever they were on-duty.

Alabama has an 88% compliance rate for seat belt usage, so the TFRS is higher than the state average (97%) for non-emergency driving. Since urgency is considered a critical factor in buckling up, it was expected that this number would be higher, but higher than the state average was a pleasant surprise. There appears to be a fairly even split on whether or not there are circumstances in which a seat belt cannot be worn.

Table 1 *Knowledge of TFRS seat belt policy and compliance with that policy*

1. The TFRS has a seat belt use policy.	138 agree (99%)	1 disagree (1%)
2. I wear my seat belt when responding to an emergency.	124 agree (89%)	15 disagree (11%)
3. I wear a seat belt during routine driving while on duty.	135 agree (97%)	4 disagree (3%)
4. In some circumstances, seat belts cannot be used.	67 agree (48%)	72 disagree (52%)

Research Question 2: What are the attitudes of Tuscaloosa firefighters regarding the use of seat belts in department vehicles? Survey Questions 5, 6, and 7 addressed this issue. An attitude is a predisposition to react a certain way toward a person, place, thing or event. They are most often a result of direct experience or observation in the environment. Question five was directed at knowledge of disciplinary action for not non-compliance. The majority responding agree there is disciplinary action for those failing to buckle up, yet Deputy Chief George White stated there are no documented instances of disciplinary action on this matter. This is an interesting point as it relates to safety culture. This may point to a broad definition of the term “discipline” to include a sharply-worded reminder at the time of the infraction, a perception that the progressive discipline policy does apply to this action or it may simply appear to be the correct answer. Also, if we have employees not buckling up as required, why hasn’t there been any disciplinary action? Perhaps it isn’t seen as a serious infraction.

Questions six and seven addressed reasoning for decision-making when enroute to an emergency. The majority disagree that taking the extra seconds to fasten ones seat belt is a waste of time. Conversely, 132 (95-percent) disagreed that buckling up was a waste of time when rapid response was critical. This appears to be in contrast to the results of Survey Question 7 that

addressed the practice of donning to SCBA after arriving at the scene in order to accommodate seat belting. These responses were split almost evenly with approximately 50% on each side of the statement.

One of the foreseen circumstances may be revealed in Survey Question 7, in which 64 (46%) reported that putting on the SCBA after arriving on the scene is an unnecessary delay. One can infer that attitudes toward seat belts support the value of seat belts unless the practice forces one to wait until arriving on the fireground to don SCBA. In that case, apparently seconds do count. This attitude is reinforced by the complacent mentality, “we have always done it this way” expressed by the NFFF Communications Director Bill Manning. People behave in an unsafe manner because they have never been hurt before while performing their job that way.

Table 2 *Knowledge of disciplinary action for non-compliance with the seat belt policy and reasoning for decision-making when enroute to an emergency*

5. There is no discipline for failing to wear a seat belt.	27 agree (20%)	112 disagree (80%)
6. When seconds count, buckling a seat belt is a waste of time.	7 agree (5%)	132 disagree (95%)
7. Putting on the SCBA after arriving on the scene is an unnecessary delay.	64 agree (46%)	75 disagree (54%)

Research Question 3: What are the perceived obstacles to seat belt use in department vehicles? For the purposes of this question, the survey attempted to measure the respondent’s typical seat belt practices, their perception of design safety in the apparatus and their history of

vehicular accidents while on-duty. Question eight considered their attitude on engineered safety of the vehicle. Only two believed the design of an apparatus precludes the use of a seat belt. This is a telling number in that it seems members understand that seat belts are necessary for their personal safety when riding in TFRS apparatus.

Survey Question 9 was intended to assess understanding of which position or rank is ultimately responsible for making sure all parties are buckled up before the engine rolls. Specifically, the question was directed at the responsibility of the AO. Section Eight of the Vehicle Operating Policy states that the AO is only responsible for making sure passengers are seated and in place; each rider is individually and personally responsible for the proper use of seat belts. Forty members (28%) agreed that the AO is responsible; 99 (72-percent) disagreed. Several wrote in clarifying comments that although the AO was responsible according to the policy, he/she believed they were responsible for their own compliance. This data appears to be in line with an informal survey conducted by the author, in which firefighters were asked, “Who is responsible for making sure everyone wears a seat belt?” Even though this is not a qualitative tool, it is interesting to note that 100% of the time, the answer was “the driver.”

The value of this question may lie in the perception of accountability. Members who do not feel personally responsible, but believe someone else should make them comply, may be less likely to buckle up voluntarily.

The author acknowledges that this question could have been better worded. The intent was to find out who the responders believe responsible *as found in the appropriate policy*. The wording allowed confusion as to whether the question referred to the actual policy or if it referred to simply the responder’s attitude about their personal accountability.

The final question asked if the member had been involved in a vehicle accident while on-

duty with the TFRS in order to assess previous experiences. The intent of this question was to measure their history with MVAs. In other words, are vehicle accidents something that only happens to others? Forty-one of the 139 responders had been involved in an MVA while on-duty with the TFRS, so there should be understanding that they are vulnerable to MVC.

Table 3 *Attitude on engineered safety of the vehicle, perception of responsible party and history of MVAs while on-duty with TFRS*

8. The design of the apparatus makes seat belts unnecessary. 2 agree (14%) 137 disagree (86%)
9. It is the AO's responsibility to make sure I wear a seat belt. 40 agree (28%) 99 disagree (72%)
10. I have been involved in a MVA while on-duty with the TFRS. 41 agree (29%)
98 disagree (71%)
-

Discussion

The research results indicate that all Tuscaloosa firefighters are not safely buckled up when they are traveling on-duty. This includes both emergency and non-emergency responses. Furthermore, this failure to comply with the department policy can be found in firefighters, apparatus operators and station officers. This strongly promotes the findings of the literature review where the need for a speedy response outweighs the need to protect the lives of the firefighters making the response.

The study results were comparable with the findings of the literature review in several areas. Tuscaloosa firefighters, like those in the ARPs from Albany and Watertown, do not always buckle up when they feel that it will slow their response time. The firefighters in this study appear well-informed in the importance of seat belts in the prevention of injuries from an MVA and have an overall conviction that the time needed for buckling up is time well spent. Unfortunately, that conviction holds only until an urgent call comes in.

This leads to the possible need for an adaptive change, as cited in Background and Significance. The attitudes of some Tuscaloosa firefighters appear to be that seat belts only slow them down. An attitude can be changed, but not with only a technical solution such as a policy or pledge. To establish a new safety culture, the firefighter must be convinced that buckling up is in the best interest of the department.

The information resulting from this study was encouraging. Almost all of the participants are aware of a seat belt policy and many comply unless it is an urgent response. The honesty of those responding was a pleasant finding. There was some concern about repercussions and, despite assurances by the writer and the fire chief, some of that concern may have limited participation completely or limited honest feedback by some. Either way, the survey instrument promoted discussion and dialogue may be a positive influence on behavior. From an organizational perspective, this research will provide a foundation for improvement in this area of firefighter safety, should the administration choose to do so.

Recommendations

The results of the survey indicate that TFRS firefighters must first be educated on their personal accountability as set forth in the TFRS seat belt policy. This can be accomplished through discussion and training. Additionally, the current policy should be amended to include a

section titled “Seat Belt Policy” rather than including that information in a subsection titled “Riding.” If seat belts are important to the department, this section should stand alone. The results of this project could easily be used to bring this topic into the training schedule and serve as a good foundation for class discussion.

The department should make use of the IAFF recommendation that the company officer and driver confirm that all personnel are buckled up before the vehicle moves. Personal accountability is demonstrated with a positive response from each rider.

Once the seat belt policy is re-introduced, members should be held accountable if they fail to follow the policy. Officers should be responsible for protecting the firefighters in their command, as well as the public encountered enroute to an emergency. Urgency should not justify unreasonable risk. Research clearly indicates that states with strong seat belt law enforcement programs have higher compliance. Enhanced enforcement is working for the public; it may work in the fire service as well.

The culture of sacrifice for others is strong among firefighters. This quality is expected and even demanded by the public. The research, coupled with observation, concludes that this culture drives some Tuscaloosa firefighters to be more concerned about arriving quickly at the scene of an emergency than arriving safely. In their minds, the few seconds it takes for them to buckle up before the engine rolls can mean life or death to someone needing their help.

As a non-firefighter, the author admires this commitment but sees a weakness in the argument: most runs are not life and death. A few more seconds or minutes in the response time will not make a significant difference in the outcome of many calls. For serious emergencies, it is still more effective to arrive safely than to risk injury that will be further delay the response.

Attitudes are often slow to change, but they can be changed through consistent education and reinforcement. Signing a pledge and reading a policy once in a career will not make much difference. Everyone from the fire chief to the newest recruit must practice and model safe behavior. The emphasis should be on safety rather than response time.

The TFRS has demonstrated a concern for firefighter safety with modern equipment, routine equipment inspection and maintenance, extensive and consistent training, testing, employee evaluations and more. Why is the simple act of buckling up overlooked when it is inconvenient? Why is it acceptable to ride in a fire engine without a seat belt when failure to wear PPE properly in the fireground cause for suspension? The TFRS should revisit its commitment to safety with a clear message regarding seat belts and zero tolerance for failure to wear them every day, every call, every time.

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Appendix A

Confidential Survey Regarding Seat Belt Use
Tuscaloosa Fire & Rescue Service

The intent of this instrument is to gather information about seat belt use in the Tuscaloosa Fire & Rescue Service (TFRS). This is part of a research project for the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy. There is no “right” or “wrong” answer. There is no need or intent to identify the participants. Thank you for your cooperation.

Directions: Indicate your rank/position by placing an X in the appropriate box.

My rank/position is:

- Firefighter
- Apparatus operator
- Station officer
- Other

Directions: Place an X in the box by the answer you choose.

1. The TFRS has a seat belt use policy.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
2. I wear my seat belt when responding to an emergency.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
3. I wear a seat belt during routine driving while on duty.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
4. In some circumstances, seat belts cannot be used.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
5. There is no discipline for failing to wear a seat belt.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
6. When seconds count, buckling a seat belt is a waste of time.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
7. Putting on the SCBA after arriving on the scene is an unnecessary delay.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
8. The design of our apparatus makes seat belts unnecessary.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
9. It is the apparatus operator’s responsibility to make sure I wear a seat belt.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree
10. I have been involved in a vehicle accident while on duty at the TFRS.	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Disagree

Additional comments on this topic (optional)

Appendix B

City of Tuscaloosa

FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE

Alan J. Martin, Fire Chief

MEMORANDUM

To: All Fire Station Personnel
From: Alan J. Martin, Fire Chief
Date: **January 14, 2011**
Subject: Confidential Survey Regarding Seat Belt Use in the TFRS

Tilda Mims is completing an applied research project on seat belt use in the Tuscaloosa Fire & Rescue Service as a requirement for a course of study at the National Fire Academy. To assist her in this project, I am requesting that all personnel assigned to a fire station participate in the attached survey by **January 21, 2011**.

This is a confidential survey. There are no right or wrong answers, and there is no need or intent to identify the participants. Station captains should encourage participation, but are not expected to identify who has or has not completed the survey.

Station captains should collect completed surveys and return them to Mrs. Mims by **January 24, 2011**. Thank you for your cooperation.

Appendix C

Raw Data from Seat Belt Survey

Seat Belt Survey Results											
1=agree	2=disagree										
ID#	Rank	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
1	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
2	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1
3	SO	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1
4	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
5	AO	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	2	1
6	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	2
7	FF	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2
8	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
9	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
10	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
11	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
12	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
13	SO	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1
14	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
15	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1
16	FF	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
17	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
18	FF	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	2
19	SO	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
20	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1
21	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
22	Other	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
23	Other	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1
24	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
25	AO	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	1
26	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
27	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
28	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
29	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
30	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
31	SO	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1
32	Other	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1

33	FF	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2
34	Other	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	1
35	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	2
36	AO	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2
37	FF	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	2
38	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
39	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
40	FF	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2
41	FF	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	1
42	FF	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	2
43	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
44	SO	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	1
45	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1
46	FF	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1
47	Other	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
48	Other	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	2
49	Other	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1
50	SO	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
51	AO	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1
52	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
53	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
54	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
55	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
56	AO	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
57	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
58	FF	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1
59	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	2
60	SO	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
61	AO	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	2
62	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
63	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
64	FF	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2
65	FF	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	2
66	AO	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	1
67	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
68	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
69	SO	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2
70	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1
71	FF	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
72	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
73	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
74	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
75	AO	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	1

76	FF	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2
77	FF	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2
78	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1
79	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
80	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
81	AO	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	2
82	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
83	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
84	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
85	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
86	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
87	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
88	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
89	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
90	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
91	SO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
92	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
93	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
94	SO	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
95	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	1
96	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
97	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	1
98	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	1
99	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
100	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
101	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
102	AO	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	1
103	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
104	FF	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
105	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
106	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
107	FF	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	2	1
108	Other	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
109	FF	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2
110	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
111	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
112	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
113	FF	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1
114	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
115	FF	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
116	SO	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	1
117	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
118	SO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1

119	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	2
120	AO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	1
121	SO	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	1
122	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
123	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	1
124	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
125	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	1
126	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
127	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
128	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
129	SO	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
130	FF	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2
131	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
132	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
133	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
134	SO	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	2
135	FF	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
136	SO	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	2
137	AO	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	2
138	AO	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2
139	FF	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	2

Appendix D

Results of Confidential Survey Regarding Seat Belt Use

Tuscaloosa Fire & Rescue Service

My rank/position is:

- 61 Firefighters
- 39 Apparatus operators
- 31 Station officers
- 8 Other
- 139 Responders

1. The TFRS has a seat belt use policy.	Agree 138	Disagree 1
2. I wear my seat belt when responding to an emergency.	Agree 15	Disagree 124
3. I wear a seat belt during routine driving while on duty.	Agree 4	Disagree 135
4. In some circumstances, seat belts cannot be used.	Agree 72	Disagree 67
5. There is no discipline for failing to wear a seat belt.	Agree 27	Disagree 112
6. When seconds count, buckling a seat belt is a waste of time.	Agree 7	Disagree 132
7. Putting on the SCBA after arriving on the scene is an unnecessary delay.	Agree 64	Disagree 75
8. The design of our apparatus makes seat belts unnecessary.	Agree 2	Disagree 137
9. It is the apparatus operator's responsibility to make sure I wear a seat belt.	Agree 40	Disagree 99
10. I have been involved in a vehicle accident while on duty at the TFRS.	Agree 41	Disagree 98

Appendix E

Additional Comments Made on Seat Belt Survey

"Seat belt use is essential, but when you're expected to be ready to go when you step off the truck, there's not enough time to get ready before you leave.

"I believe seat belts save lives, no doubt. Wasting time putting on your gear when arriving at a structure fire may cost someone their life!"

"Seat belts save lives, but arriving on scene without all PPE could be a huge mistake."

"I think within the TFRS, we do a great job wearing our seat belts."

"It is my responsibility to follow the departmental policies."

"I think you should wear seat belts."

"It is each person's responsibility to wear their seat belt, but the driver shouldn't move the truck until verified."

"I marked disagree because it is my responsibility as well as his. I marked disagree (#4) because I don't know everything and there might be a time when a seat belt can't be used."

"There is no black and white answer. Different situations require different seat belt issues. There is a gray box."

"You should wear a seat belt on duty and off."

"Believe it is the AO and officer's responsibility to make sure seat belts are used."

Everything we do result from a risk analysis. Ex. If a call comes in as a house fire with occupants trapped. In this instance I would get out the door ASAP and be completely dressed on arrival. Completely dressing enroute is impossible while wearing a seat belt. We do take a greater risk when lives are in jeopardy. Driver is not supposed to move until all personnel are fastened.

Seat belts should be worn anytime, except when putting on an SCBA. I am aware that this is against policy, but enroute to a fire is the most practical time to don an SCBA.

The design of the apparatus makes it hard to put on a seat belt.

It is your own responsibility to use a seat belt. Air packs are in our seats and can be put on while wearing a seat belt; you can quickly adjust your pack after unbuckling your seat belt.

I agree the policy says it is the AO's responsibility but I don't believe it should be the AO's responsibility.

I don't understand the reasoning behind the TFRS being mentioned in this survey. If these surveys fall into the wrong hands, they could be used against us in a court of law.

I think it should be the individual's responsibility.

While I feel like wearing a seat belt is a good habit to have and saves lives, I don't like that there are laws trying to make personal decisions that don't affect anyone else. If someone is trapped in a house fire, we should not be in the front yard putting on our air pack when we could be on the way.

Some people were confused by #7.