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GOOD STORY

Allegheny County, Beaver County, Butler County (Pennsylvania), Emergency Teams—Rapid Intervention Team, Inc.

SUMMARY

Allegheny County, Beaver County, Butler County (Pennsylvania), Emergency Teams—Rapid Intervention Team, Inc. (ABBET-RIT) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of firefighter safety through information and resource sharing. ABBET-RIT improves incident site safety by providing information, training, and a collaborative environment where its members can exchange best practices.

BACKGROUND

Three Pittsburgh firefighters were killed in a three-alarm house fire on February 14, 1995. The firefighters were unable to escape from the burning dwelling before their air supply expired and they died of asphyxiation. A [United States Fire Administration Technical Report](#) attributed the fatalities to several incident site problems, including: the late implementation of Incident Command, the lack of on-site crew integrity, and inadequate personnel accountability procedures. The deaths affected many Pennsylvania firefighters and fire departments.

The Pittsburgh house fire prompted the Pennsylvania fire community to focus on firefighter safety. A greater awareness of the Incident Command System (ICS), rapid intervention teams (RIT), personnel accountability systems (PAS), as well as other safety measures, spread throughout Pennsylvania fire organizations. Fire departments started to meet informally and found they had similar problems, concerns, and goals regarding fireground safety.

In 1999, the issue of firefighter safety brought together three fire departments from the Western Pennsylvania counties of Allegheny, Beaver, and Butler. The firefighters met at a local restaurant to discuss training methodologies and emergency response procedures. The discussions largely centered on personnel accountability and rapid intervention. Within a year, the group was holding monthly meetings and had grown to include more than ten fire departments. In addition, the group had adopted personnel accountability and rapid intervention standard operating procedures (SOPs) to improve mutual aid operations between their jurisdictions.

In 2001, the group of firefighters became an official organization. Members developed a set of organizational by-laws with the aid of an area firefighter who was also a lawyer. The by-laws were agreed upon and, in May, representatives from each of the three counties signed incorporation papers for ABBET-RIT, Inc. Shortly thereafter, ABBET-RIT elections were held. Elected officers assumed their positions in January 2002.

ABBET-RIT's Motto

"In God we trust, in RIT we depend. If you can't come out, we're coming in."

GOALS

ABBET-RIT's goal is to improve fireground safety in order to save firefighters' lives. They pursue this goal by:

- Educating fire organizations on the need for a standard PAS and rapid intervention;
- Researching and developing firefighter safety equipment and training; and
- Continuing to "break down the city, borough, township, county, and state lines that separate fire organizations."

DESCRIPTION

ABBET-RIT is a not-for-profit organization focused on the promotion of firefighter safety through free and open information sharing. ABBET-RIT encompasses 27 fire departments in the following Western Pennsylvania counties:

- Allegheny County
- Armstrong County
- Beaver County
- Butler County
- Clarion County
- Westmoreland County

ABBET-RIT's efforts to improve firefighter safety have been reported on by several media outlets, including the Fire Emergency Television Network, Fireengineering.com, Firehouse.com, and Rapidintervention.com. ABBET-RIT has three defining characteristics that make it both a practical and exemplary group: monthly meetings, organizational unity, and active committees.



Monthly Meetings

ABBET-RIT holds monthly meetings at which members ask questions and share experiences/lessons learned relevant to firefighter safety. The meetings follow a basic agenda, but afford everyone an opportunity to voice their opinions and inquiries. Issues discussed at ABBET-RIT meetings fall into a variety of categories, including:

- Communications;
- Emergency response training;
- Insurance;
- Mutual aid agreements;
- Personnel accountability;
- Rapid intervention;
- Staffing; and
- SOPs.

Meetings are held at a different member's department each month. This affords all ABBET-RIT members a chance to "show-off their house" and reinforces ABBET-RIT's non-hierarchical structure.

Organizational Unity

ABBET-RIT uses a collaborative approach to eliminate jurisdictional boundaries that separate fire organizations. Regular collaboration allows ABBET-RIT members to share

ideas, procedures, equipment, and friendship. It also promotes the following good practices:

- **Quarterly training sessions:** ABBET-RIT provides free quarterly training sessions for its members. In the past, sessions have emphasized the ICS, the safety officer position, rapid intervention, building construction, personnel accountability, as well as several other topics. ABBET-RIT utilizes the expertise of trainers from around the county to provide these educational opportunities.
- **Standardized identification of personnel qualifications:** ABBET-RIT members use a helmet decal system that enables personnel to identify the qualification level of an individual or group of individuals at an incident site. This system is important since most response operations that occur within ABBET-RIT members' jurisdictions include mutual aid from other ABBET-RIT partners.
- **Standardization of SOPs:** ABBET-RIT members share a common PAS and have similar rapid intervention protocols.
- **Standardization of RIT colors & staging:** ABBET-RIT members have equipped their RITs with orange clothing for identification purposes during mutual aid events. In addition, ABBET-RIT has adopted a distinctive orange RIT tool tarp to distinguish tools specifically staged for RITs from those staged for general use.

ABBET-RIT members also have used their organization to conduct joint equipment purchases. In the past, the group has purchased lighted ropes, RIT tarps, T-N-T tools, as well as other fireground equipment.

Active Committees

ABBET-RIT has several active committees that help its members and the fire community at-large. Committees of note include: training, research and development, and newsletter.

Training Committee

ABBET-RIT offers personnel accountability training for organizations that have not adopted a PAS or are looking to improve upon their existing system. The four-hour course details the reasons for using a PAS at all fire operations, as well as the specific PAS used by ABBET-RIT members. A team of state certified instructors conducts the course, which includes:

- A PowerPoint presentation highlighting the components of a successful PAS, as well as case studies involving Line of Duty Deaths (LODD) caused specifically by a lack of fireground accountability; and
- A breakout session where individuals are grouped into teams and sent to various locations throughout a classroom or building. The breakout session allows course attendees to conduct an actual personnel accountability report, a primary component of a functioning PAS.

To date, ABBET-RIT has provided personnel accountability training to over 5,000 firefighters in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. The accountability course is offered at a minimal fee that covers the cost of meals during the session.

Research and Program Development Committee

ABBET-RIT's Research and Program Development Committee aids in the creation of new educational courses and training evolutions for ABBET-RIT members. Research is focused on lessons learned from past exercises/incidents and is included in future ABBET-RIT training exercises.

Newsletter Committee

ABBET-RIT publishes a quarterly newsletter that provides its members with information on firefighter safety, training, and upcoming events. In addition, a member department is featured in each issue. ABBET-RIT's newsletter is free to all members due to private donations and a corporate sponsor that helps pay for its production and distribution.

Joining ABBET-RIT

ABBET-RIT actively seeks new members. Accordingly, ABBET-RIT encourages non-members to attend its monthly meetings. A list of meeting times and locations can be found on [ABBET-RIT's website](#).

REQUIREMENTS

Keys to Success

- **Common Goals:** ABBET-RIT members have the common goal of eliminating LODDs through proactive training, information exchange, and partnership.
- **Equality:** ABBET-RIT members trade ideas equally regardless of department size, call volume, or composition. This promotes an egalitarian environment and facilitates information sharing.
- **Forward Thinking:** ABBET-RIT is a dynamic organization that continues to evolve and embrace new technologies, equipment, and procedures relevant to firefighter safety.

Resources

ABBET-RIT is funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Department of Community and Economic Development. In addition, ABBET-RIT receives funding from private donations, the sale of qualification helmet decals, accountability classes, and advertisements placed in their quarterly newsletter.

Links

- Allegheny County, Beaver County, Butler County (Pennsylvania), Emergency Teams—Rapid Intervention Team, Inc.: <http://www.abbetrit.org/>
- *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice series, "[Incident Site Safety Planning](#)." September 2, 2005. ([LLIS.gov ID# 14402](#))

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