



# NEWS



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## **‘It was like this dark secret’**

Paola Baker, Victorville Daily Press

Posted September 23, 2018 at 12:01 AM



A San Bernardino County firefighter attacks a fire at a homeless camp in Victorville on July 26, 2017. Firefighters frequently become victims of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but now more agencies are putting programs together to help them cope. [James Quigg, Daily Press]

Frank Lima still remembers, with a disturbing amount of clarity, some of the images he saw as part of the group of firefighters who responded to the World Trade Center terrorist attacks on 9/11.

“I have a noise — a horrific noise, a scream, from someone trapped inside— I can still hear it in my head, years later. It was just too late to save them,” Lima said.

Lima, vice president for the International Association of Fire Firefighters (IAFF)’s 10th District, which covers large areas of the West Coast, has been in the firefighting world for almost 30 years. In that time, he’s covered deadly house fires, the WTC attacks, drive-by shootings and much more.

It becomes normal in a way, Lima says. Firefighters are often used to jumping from call to call, patient to patient, incident to incident, often without taking much of a breath or giving a passing thought to what they just experienced.

But much like the layer of soot and ash that tends to permeate all firefighters’ uniforms and gear, some incidents stick around much longer than intended.

“I still get nightmares from time to time,” Lima said. “I’ll go for months at a time where I don’t get them, then all of a sudden they start again.”

It’s a scenario that’s heartbreakingly familiar to anyone who’s spent time in the fire service, a world where bravery, pride, and the overwhelming need to help others can often overshadow the inherent trauma that comes with it.

“Everyone knows we go to fires, but we respond to every single emergency there is,” Lima said. “We actually touch those hurt and dead patients. And it wears on you.”

### **A silent killer**

The IAFF has been at the forefront of raising awareness of the high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in firefighters, especially as suicides continue to increase.

A study commissioned by the Ruderman Family Foundation in 2017 found that first responders, including firefighters, are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty. Last year, there were at least 103 firefighter suicides, compared to 93 line-of-duty deaths.

PTSD and depression rates among firefighters also have been found to be as much as five times higher than the rates among civilians, according to the study.

“To me, that’s job-related,” Barstow Fire Protection District Capt. Travis Espinoza said. “We can tie that back to the things we do and see.”

The symptoms of PTSD and depression can be quite varied, especially from person to person. But authorities say they tend to fall into one of three categories: intrusive memories, avoidance or emotional numbing, and anxiety and increased emotional arousal.

Some of the more common symptoms are sleep or eating disorders, depression, irritability and isolation. This can lead firefighters to self-sabotaging behaviors, such as substance abuse, in an effort to cope.

“The more you drink, the more exhausted you get and you’ll pass out and won’t get the nightmares,” Lima said, offering an example.

But it can sometimes be as innocuous as a firefighter getting “a little too quiet after a call,” as Espinoza put it. He’s strived to lead by example, making sure his crew always knows they have someone to turn to.

“I try to keep my guys talking. I’m sitting here at the station having this conversation around all the guys right now,” Espinoza said. “I try to always stay available if they need to talk. It’s hard for firefighters to just reach out.”

This stigma can be a powerful barrier to seeking help. Many will instead turn to other coping mechanisms, both positive and negative. But authorities are now slowly realizing to that the issue needs to be addressed head-on.

“I’m glad this is starting to get out. It’s always been there, kind of like this dark secret,” Lima said. “Just no one wanted to talk about it.”

### **Peeling back the layers**

Espinoza and Lima both said the stigma associated with seeking help for trauma was a major factor in keeping PTSD among firefighters in the shadows.

“Back then it was just ‘keep your mouth shut, suck it up.’ You’d come back to the station and the senior firefighters were just laughing at the stuff they’d seen,” Lima said. “That’s how they dealt with it.”

Espinoza categorized it as a “generational gap” between veteran firefighters and newer recruits, a gap that can still be difficult to effectively bridge.

“We have a hard time reaching the older guys sometimes — they’re still very much into the mindset of ‘we’re bad, we can handle this,’” Espinoza said.

One way to get through the storm is to simply become more aware of the signs that it's building. As such, fire departments around the nation are tackling the issue from the very beginning, starting with fresh recruits.

Lima said the IAFF is "aggressively training" union members to become what they call "behavioral health peers," firefighters trained to look for signs of PTSD and provide some counseling if needed.

"We've found that firefighters would rather talk to their own people, at least as a first buffer, to eventually getting help," Lima said.

**San Bernardino County Fire Department** spokeswoman Tracey Martinez said the department has an internal peer support group, along with contracting with Counseling Team International, which specializes in helping public safety personnel, to provide needed services.

"After any major incident or any incident that has the potential to be traumatizing, we have a debriefing that will include members from the support group or the counselors, depending on the need," Martinez said.

New recruits going through the Fire Academy also go through training, along with their families, to talk about PTSD in the fire service, "what they can expect and what they should be looking for."

"Many times firefighters might not know they're going through PTSD," Martinez said. "And it can hit you days, even years, after the incident. So we're trying to train to look for the signs."

The IAFF opened up an innovative "Recovery Center" last year for firefighters going through PTSD or depression. Located in Maryland, the 15-acre facility, designed to look and feel like a firehouse, boasts a full gym, pool, and a range of experts ready to help.

"It's a first for firefighters — it's built for them," Lima said. "It's one of the first places to offer dual help, in addressing behavioral health and the symptoms and coping mechanisms that can come with them, such as drinking or substance abuse."

The IAFF is looking to open a second location in the West Coast to be able to treat more firefighters around the country, along with spreading awareness on the issue.

"It's the way of the future — we have to prepare our firefighters earlier," Lima said. "Let them know it's OK to reach out if you see something that gets to you, and you will. We have to let them know that, instead of having them figure it out on their own after the fact."

Visit <https://www.iaffrecoverycenter.com/center/> for more information on the recovery center and for further resources on PTSD and what signs to look out for.

<http://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20180923/it-was-like-this-dark-secret>

## **Council considers Project Phoenix actions**

**Kurt Schauppner, The Desert Trail**

Posted: Thursday, September 20, 2018 1:50 pm | Updated: 1:50 pm, Thu Sep 20, 2018

TWENTYNINE PALMS — The City Council will consider taking two actions related to the Project Phoenix downtown redevelopment project when they meet in regular session at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 25, in council chambers at city hall, 6136 Adobe Road.

Council members will consider authorizing the city manager to negotiate and execute an engineering contract with NV5 for furtherance of site improvements for Project Phoenix.

The contract is not to exceed \$238,300 plus a 10 percent contingency.

The consultant's work will begin at 2 p.m. Oct. 4 with a kick off meeting.

A proposal letter from the firm to City Manager Frank Luckino outlines 39 tasks relayed to Project Phoenix the firm plans to complete.

These include scheduling coordination meetings with agencies and project stakeholders, including SCE, the Twentynine Palms Water District, Caltrans and the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**.

Council members will also review proposed streetscape design elements for Project Phoenix.

[http://www.hidesertstar.com/the\\_desert\\_trail/news/article\\_c9c22810-bd16-11e8-a807-4ff1ecc85c27.html](http://www.hidesertstar.com/the_desert_trail/news/article_c9c22810-bd16-11e8-a807-4ff1ecc85c27.html)

## 12-year-old girl airlifted after crash on Ridgecrest Road in Victorville

Staff Writer, Victor Valley News Group

Posted September 21, 2018



A 12-year-old girl was airlifted following a crash in Victorville. (Gabriel D. Espinoza, Victor Valley News)

VICTORVILLE, Calif. (VVNG.com) — A 12-year-old girl was airlifted to a trauma center following a two-vehicle crash Friday afternoon.

It was reported at approximately 2:30 p.m. at Chinquapin Drive and Ridgecrest Road and involved a silver 2012 Toyota Camry and a white 2001 Chevy Tahoe.

When first responders arrived on scene, the juvenile was unconscious, according to the **San Bernardino County Fire** scanner traffic.

A short time later she became alert and complained of neck and back pain and was transported by ground ambulance to Desert Valley Hospital and then airlifted to Loma Linda University Medical Center.

Two other people from the crash were reported to have minor injuries.

It's unclear how the crash happened at this time.

Ridgecrest Road was briefly closed while emergency personnel worked the scene. The California Highway Patrol is investigating the crash.

<https://www.vvng.com/12-year-old-girl-airlifted-after-crash-on-ridgecrest-road-in-victorville/>

## **OPINION: County residents should be allowed to vote on FP-5 fire tax**

By The Daily Press Editorial Board, Victorville Daily Press

Posted Sep 23, 2018 at 12:01 AM

The **San Bernardino County Fire Department** is attempting to beef up its revenue by expanding Service Zone FP-5 to virtually all unincorporated county areas (with certain exceptions).

So if you live and own property in Oak Hills, Lucerne Valley, Phelan and just about any other unincorporated part of the High Desert, you may be hit with an annual tax of \$157.26 per parcel. Oh, and that rate will increase by 3 percent every year, a so-called inflationary factor.

The only way you won't be hit with this tax is if enough property owners protest and then vote not to be subjected to it. It will take 25 percent of affected property owners to protest to force a vote on the tax. Then more than 50 percent must vote against it.

County Fire Chief Mark Hartwig says his department is facing a \$29.3 million deficit and the FP-5 tax would generate \$26.9 million per year. At a series of community meetings the past month or so, he has stressed that County Fire needs the new tax money just to maintain existing services.

We'll have to take Hartwig's word for it, but we wonder what could have been done to reduce this deficit without another tax. After all, aren't property taxes supposed to already help pay for public safety services? If so, wouldn't the FP-5 tax really be double taxation on those affected?

The reality is government at any level rarely lives within its means, or even tries to do so. Taxpayers are continually asked for more, more, more.

In this case, however, we feel County Fire should have asked for the money fairly, by putting the issue on the ballot from the start and letting those affected vote on it.

Community meetings and a confusing mailer sent to property owners just don't cut it. Neither does forcing property owners who want to obtain a protest form to have to go to the [www.sbcfire.org](http://www.sbcfire.org) website to do so. It's cumbersome, especially for property owners in rural areas who either don't have internet service or whose internet service is slow.

Why force property owners to jump through hoops to protest unless you're trying to discourage them from doing so in order to unfairly obtain the tax revenue?

We appreciate the efforts of County Fire when they're on the job, fighting fires and making rescues.

But when is somebody, anybody, going to rescue taxpayers?

<http://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20180923/county-residents-should-be-allowed-to-vote-on-fp-5-fire-tax>