

## Colorado Fallen Firefighter Memorial Remembrance Ceremony May 9, 2009

Keynote Address by  
Chris Riley, Fire Chief, City of Pueblo and President, CSFCA

*"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends".* Those words were spoken over 2000 years ago and to this day have great meaning for our chosen profession. These words help to frame why we are gathered here today-that is to honor the 136 heroes who have lost their lives protecting this great State of Colorado.

We are here to honor these heroes, who have gone before us, and made the ultimate sacrifice for their fellowman. We are here to honor their service to humanity, fellow firefighters, and their community. We are here to pay tribute to their memory by remembering their courage and sense of duty. We are also here to assist in the healing process for those grieving and standing here amongst us today.

Webster defines "hero" as any man or woman admired for their courage, nobility or exploits; or any person who is admired for their qualities or achievements and regarded for their ideals and being a model.

Firefighters have long been admired for these traits. Surely the people who have gone before us here are heroes for placing themselves in situations of risk and danger for the benefit of saving others. There is an inherent and inbred sense of helping others that is in the make-up and personality of a firefighter. A firefighter would attempt to move heaven and earth to prevent disaster or save a life.

While it is right and fitting that we meet here to remember the past heroes, we must also think of the present. We are here to thank the families of those loved ones and the sacrifice that those families have made. There are no words that can reach out to each of you and surround you like the hug and the love of the firefighter you lost.

It is right and proper that we are here to remember the living, those in the fire service who still fight the good fight on a daily basis. This includes those standing here today, who sacrifice themselves, their families and their daytime jobs for the privilege to serve their community.

For those of us actively working in the fire service today, let's remember the sacrifices that have been made and honor our fallen heroes by improving our culture and perspective on firefighter safety. Let's make every effort to not have serious injuries or fatal sacrifices by renewing our commitment and to do everything in our power to improve firefighter safety. This includes increasing our intolerance for safety violations and other unacceptable risks.

On a national average, we lose over 100 firefighters a year. That should be unacceptable to us. When firefighters approach an emergency scene, the casualty rate of firefighters should be zero. In other words, we do not have an "acceptable" casualty rate when fighting a fire.

We should not accept firefighter deaths in vain. If we take no further preventative actions, we are generally accepting the loss and that is smudging the memories of those gone before us. We should not consider "near misses" with complacency, but rather a strong urgency to prevent it from happening again.

Promoting safety is about strong, smart, and visible leadership. Safety involves promoting simple and no-nonsense best practices at all levels of a fire department. We need to be safety driven in everything we do. Mandate the wearing of seat belts in your organization. Mandate Air Management and firefighter survival policies, Mandate full protective clothing, Mandate the use of the Incident Command System, Mandate firefighter accountability on the Fireground, along with conducting comprehensive training and fire prevention. Train as if your life depends upon it, because it does! Pre-Plan and inspect the buildings in your jurisdiction for the safety of the business occupants and the firefighters who may respond to a major fire. Look at these buildings and ask yourself how you would fight a fire here in the middle of the night with very little time to make life saving decisions.

This is a short list of the many things that need to be part of our everyday fire service culture in terms of protecting our most valuable asset, our Firefighters!

Do you promote health, wellness and physical fitness for your firefighters? The #1 cause of LODD's every year involves cardio vascular emergencies. Let's ask the wife or the husband, the son or daughter, or the parents if their loved ones were an acceptable loss. I would submit that if you are looking at the cost of safety, ask that same wife or husband, son or daughter, parents, what their cost has been. There is the REAL COST.

Whose responsibility is firefighter safety? Simple answer-everyone! However, the responsibility of firefighter safety starts with the Fire Chief and extends to the least senior firefighter on the department. Every single member of the department must ask themselves what they can do to lessen the chances of a firefighter death or injury.

However, we as Fire Chiefs, Chief Officers, and Company Officers in the audience, we have the added responsibility to make sure there is a culture and climate of intolerance for safety violations within our organizations.

I also want ask all of us here today who are active members of the fire service-What legacy do personally want to leave your department when you retire? For some, retirement may be many years away or just around the corner. Regardless of time, what legacy do you want to leave? What will your "shadow" of safety and job performance look like?

I would like to offer another thought-the fire service uniform badge we all wear. Someone who once walked our post or position gave us the Badge we are wearing today. That person passed their legacy onto us-only you know what that legacy was. Someday, we will all pass along our badge and legacy to another person-what kind of legacy will that person inherit from us? When we leave our post, we should leave it better then we found it. As one of my mentors told me years ago, set the good example-don't be the bad example.

My point is this-the Badge we are wearing today far transcends us as individuals. Some may call it Divine Providence, others a calling, others the profession they have chosen. Regardless of your personal beliefs, we owe it to the community we serve, our department, the fire service, and the next person that we pass our badge to, the great privilege of giving them something better then what we inherited. I believe this sacred credo is what has given the fire service a great heritage. We are truly standing on the shoulders of fire service giants-those that carved a path of greatness for us to continue in the present as well as prepare the path for the next generation of firefighters.

Please allow to get personal-If you have a serious injury or fatality in your department, you will have to live with the question, "Could I have prevented this". Firefighting is by nature a very hazardous occupation but there should be no "acceptable loss".

I want to offer this as a daily advice for all us who are active in the fire service today-Be Transparent! Constantly talk about how we can improve-never get complacent-never stop striving to improve-openly talk amongst ourselves how we can improve ourselves as individuals and departments. How many times have great ideas been generated following a fire incident by simply having a round table discussion with you and your crews? I can think of many great policies created by "after fire discussions" at the firehouse over a cup of coffee-some of these discussions were very matter of fact-others were passionate and heated. When we walked away from these discussions, quite often there was a bonding and mutual respect to improve ourselves for the next alarm. Here is another well known fact-Firefighters by nature are very competitive-when one comes up with a great policy idea, another will build upon it to improve it.

I have talked about those past and addressed those living. I would like to close today by completing this circle with something we are all familiar with and remembering all of those who have given that ultimate sacrifice for humanity's benefit. And, by listening to these words of an unknown author, remember the "real cost."

Read the Firefighter Prayer  
When I'm called to duty God  
wherever flames may rage  
give me strength to save a life  
whatever be its age  
Help me to embrace a little child  
before it is too late  
or save an older person from  
the horror of that fate  
Enable me to be alert  
to hear the weakest shout  
and quickly and efficiently  
to put the fire out  
I want to fill my calling and  
to give the best in me  
to guard my neighbor and  
protect his property  
And if according to your will  
I have to lose my life  
bless with your protecting hand  
my children and my wife

Thank you for allowing me the privilege to share these words with you today. I am truly honored to stand here with you as a fellow firefighter as we pay tribute and respect to our fallen heroes. God Bless you, God Bless America and may God bless and protect the members of the great Colorado Fire Service and communities we serve. Thank you.