



Boston curbs firefighter injuries through focus on health, safety



DYLAN KAUFMAN/O2X

O2X specialist Annie Okerlin presented yoga nidra to Boston Fire Academy recruits during a workshop.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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The Boston Fire Department has seen reductions in the number of firefighters hurt on the job, a trend the department's commissioner says has been driven by health-and-safety-focused initiatives that have garnered national praise.

The efforts have firefighters doing more physical conditioning, with workouts that target specific muscles

used on the job. They are also learning how to improve their nutrition and better manage stress and mental health. And there's increased emphasis on ensuring that they avoid unnecessary risks, including properly cleaning safety equipment to prevent [exposure to harmful chemicals and carcinogens](#).

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By cutting down on injuries and improving staff well-being, the agency says it has saved taxpayer dollars and put its members in better position to fight fires and save lives.

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“The public expects when they see all their worldly possessions being destroyed by fire and they're missing a child or a grandparent, that firefighters have the physical endurance and capacity to go in and make that difficult save,” Commissioner Joseph Finn said.

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Four years ago, when Finn took the helm of the department, he implemented a heightened focus on firefighter health and safety, creating a new division focused on wellness and launching training and education programs — with particular attention to measures to curb high cancer rates among firefighters.

In 2014, there were, on average, about 64 firefighters on injury leave in any given month. That figure has since dropped to an average of 54.

The department also says it has seen a dip in the number of times firefighters call out sick.

Officials acknowledged the reductions could be partly attributed to other factors. But Finn said he's convinced the health and wellness programs are playing an important role.

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“As far as cost savings, when you start looking at things like man hours, the cost of injuries, the costs of treatment, and of drug therapies, and things like that, it's around a \$4 million reduction over the two years, which is significant,” he added.

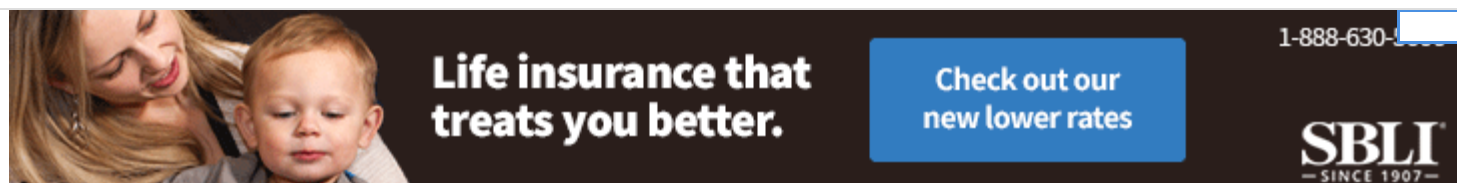
Boston's push to improve firefighters' health has earned it national recognition.

Last year the Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Association, an organization of 200 fire chiefs representing the largest cities in the United States and Canada, [bestowed](#) Finn with its “Fire Chief of the Year” award for his efforts to promote health.

Historically, experts in the field say, fire departments and their staffs have often avoided talking about the physical toll the job can take — never mind the impact on mental health — because of concerns it would make them look weak.

“A lot of times you just say ‘Oh, suck it up, you'll be fine,’ ” said Sanders.

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Finn said one key to changing the culture in Boston Fire has been the agency's [partnership](#) with a company called O2X, which the department has paid a total of \$919,875 since 2015 to run health and wellness programs.

The company is led by former Navy SEALs. The vast majority of the department's hires since 9/11 have been veterans, said Finn, who served in the Marines.

Even for nonveterans, "A lot of firefighters are Type-A personalities. Macho. Afraid to show or admit that something's going on," Finn said. "But when they hear from highly decorated Navy Seals on what they've gone through and where they've been, it relieves them of that fear."

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