

THE HOOSIER RESPONDER

NOVEMBER 2024



HOOSIERS IN ACTION

First Responders Tackle Dangerous Mission to Save Hurricane Survivors

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

- Sky-high enhancements for Hoosier firefighters
- Upcoming deadline for free PFAS Foam Collection Program
- New online toolkit supports volunteer firefighter recruitment efforts
- Free programs teach responders about people with disabilities
- Resources for disaster victims compiled in one easy location
- Weather service simplifying its warning alerts to provide better clarity



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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Months of planning for a safe and secure election revealed how great collaboration and communication between public servants benefit all Hoosiers.

For nearly a year, IDHS has been just one of several entities meeting to plan the 2024 general election and ensure everyone had the right to vote safely. These meetings (sometimes multiple each week) allowed state and federal resources to work together in ways they typically have not done before, or at least not under the circumstances that came with this election.

Federal partners in this effort included the FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), which is part of the federal Department of Homeland Security. CISA has a cyber specialist assigned to each state and region, and that focused effort shined brightly in the efficient voting processes seen across the country, especially in Indiana. State partners included the Indiana State Police, Secretary of State, Indiana Office of Technology, Indiana Elections Commission and Indiana National Guard. On behalf of IDHS, I want to thank all these important partners for getting us to this point and helping secure one of our nation's most sacred systems.

I would be remiss without thanking the thousands of local election officials who manned the polling places, volunteered their time and sometimes endured very difficult environments to ensure their community members could vote. It really is one of the most genuine benchmarks of a democratic system. These servants at the local level are critical, and the election — any election — could not be held without their efforts.

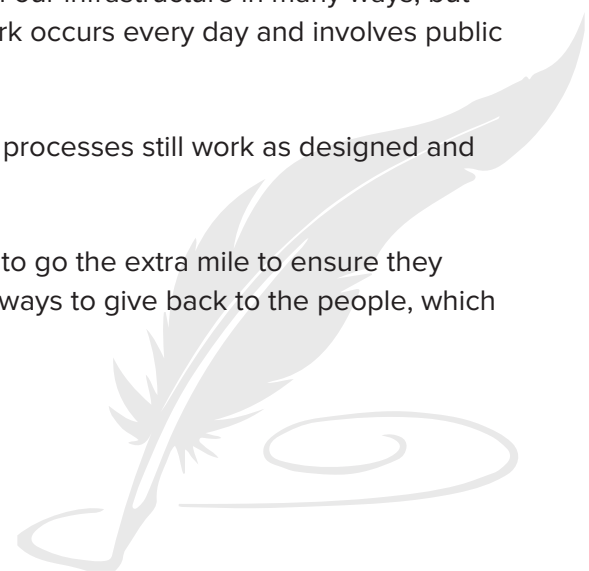
CISA Director Jen Easterly issued a Nov. 6 statement about the election, which she referred to as “the peaceful and secure exercise of democracy.” She added: “We have no evidence of any malicious activity that had a material impact on the security or integrity of our election infrastructure.”

Make no mistake, cybersecurity bad actors continue to try to threaten our infrastructure in many ways, but your elected officials are working just as hard to protect you. This work occurs every day and involves public servants at the local, state and federal levels.

Regardless of your personal political beliefs, these iconic democratic processes still work as designed and allow our country to be a beacon to others across the world.

I am proud to work for a state that puts the citizens first and is willing to go the extra mile to ensure they can live and operate in a democratic society. It is one of the greatest ways to give back to the people, which officials at every level do every day.


Jonathan Whitham
Acting Executive Director





SKY-HIGH ENHANCEMENTS FOR HOOSIER FIREFIGHTERS

PLANNED FACILITY BRINGS UNIQUE TRAINING OPTION FOR INDIANA

The next development in the ongoing transformation of firefighter training in Indiana was announced recently at what one day will become the anchor for the Indiana Fire and Public Safety Academy system.

The Academy and the Office of the Indiana State Fire Marshal, both part of the Indiana Department of Homeland Security (IDHS), identified a location in Plainfield as a specialized training site to serve as the hub of the [Hub-and-Spoke training model](#) currently under construction across the state. With help from a first-ever allocation of \$7.7 million from the Indiana General Assembly, the training system is

building 13 additional training sites across Indiana, all managed and operated from the Plainfield location. Additionally, the Alan W. Burns High-Rise Training Facility in Plainfield will feature a nine-story steel container structure that will serve as a unique training feature for the Midwest and beyond.

“I am as excited to be here as I have been in my 40 years in the fire service,” Indiana State Fire Marshal Steve Jones told a large crowd at the groundbreaking for the Burns site (named after a long-time Madison Township Fire Department chief dedicated to training). “We all are working together here to move the fire service forward for the future.”



Marshal Jones thanks the crowd at the Plainfield groundbreaking.

In addition to the other new sites for physical firefighter skill training, the Burns site is the latest development to eliminate training deserts and provide specialized training for Hoosier firefighters. Only a handful of these high-rise features exist to allow firefighters to practice fire attacks in a variety of height scenarios, including a hotel or dorm room hallway approach or an open-office concept high above the ground. Today, most firefighters in Indiana experience high-rise fires for the first time during a real emergency.

“This is a deficiency that we need to address with the Hub-and-Spoke model,” said John Shafer, Academy director. “This will give firefighters the opportunity to train and prepare for that kind of threat.”

The land for the Burns site was provided to IDHS by the Indiana Department of Correction (DOC). The Town of Plainfield also helped to prepare the location of the training site, which is several years in the making. Burns was a familiar face to DOC fire officials and was dedicated to helping a new generation of firefighters understand the importance of ongoing training. Bryce Burns, the son of the namesake Burns, said his father would have been proud to have his name on a facility that is “fortifying our community and our state’s safety.”

Tony Murray, president of the Indiana Professional Firefighters Union of Indiana, and Larry Curl, lobbyist for the Indiana Volunteer Fire Chiefs Association, were on hand to celebrate this milestone for the Hoosier fire community.



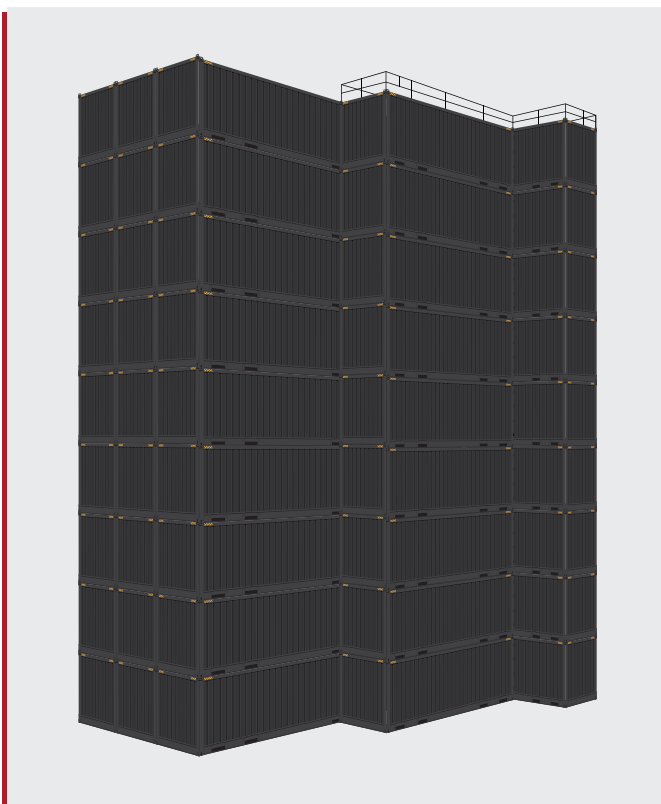
Bryce Burns, son of Alan W. Burns, at the groundbreaking.

Several additional Indiana communities also were honored at the event to learn their local communities had been chosen as the next phase of the Hub-and-Spoke construction. The initiative sought to build physical firefighter training facilities within 30 miles of each community, thereby eliminating challenges for training that continue to impact the fire service, especially in the way of volunteer recruitment. The Phase III sites announced were Covington (Fountain County), Winchester (Randolph County), Vincennes (Knox County) and Seymour (Jackson County). As part of the agreement to build the facility, the hosting fire departments agreed to open the facility to nearby fire departments for no-cost training.

“We’re elated,” said Garth Kasols, chief of the Covington Fire Department. “This will have a big impact. We have 10-12 departments in the area that will benefit from this.”

The 13 newly constructed training facilities will certify firefighters with the basic physical requirements. The sites have exhausted all the money allocated in 2023 to fortify training facilities across the state.

Firefighter training in Indiana is funded through a tax on the sale of fireworks, which is why the allocation for training was so unique. Additionally, \$10 million was provided to purchase new personal protective equipment for 66 different departments, and a great need still exists to upgrade gear for Indiana’s mostly volunteer service.





COOKING UP SAFETY

As kitchens across the nation buzz with activity this Thanksgiving, it is essential to prioritize safety amid the holiday hustle and bustle. To ensure an accident-free Thanksgiving, here are some cooking safety tips to remember and share.

MIND THE BIRD

If you are roasting a turkey, ensure it is thoroughly thawed to avoid a fire. For every four pounds of bird, allocate 24 hours for thawing in the refrigerator.

TEMPERATURE MATTERS

Invest in a reliable meat thermometer. The turkey's internal temperature should reach 165°F in the thickest part of the thigh and the stuffing. Undercooked poultry can harbor dangerous bacteria, so accuracy is vital.

AVOID GREASE FIRES

Be cautious when deep frying a turkey. Set the fryer outdoors on a flat surface, away from flammable objects. Thoroughly thaw the turkey and pat it dry to prevent splattering hot oil. Never overfill the fryer, and keep a fire extinguisher designed for grease fires nearby, just in case.

CHILD AND PET SAFETY

Keep children and pets out of the kitchen to avoid accidents. Create a designated safe space for little ones to play, ensuring an adult supervises them.

PROPER FOOD STORAGE

Refrigerate leftovers promptly. Perishable foods must be put away after two hours.





PFAS COLLECTION PROGRAM NEARING ITS END

DEC. 1 DEADLINE TO SIGN UP FOR A PFAS COLLECTION

A successful program to collect and properly dispose of PFAS chemicals stored by Indiana fire departments will discontinue operations at the end of the year.

The [Indiana Class B PFAS Foam Collection Initiative](#) has gathered more than 41,000 gallons of Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl (PFAS) foam since it first launched more than a year ago as a collaborative project between the Indiana Department of Homeland Security (IDHS) and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM). Fire departments across Indiana can sign up online and then schedule an on-site pickup of

the dangerous, cancer-causing foam material used to combat hazardous materials fires.

Any department hoping to take advantage of this free service must [complete the online survey form](#) by Dec. 1 to begin the process. The month of December will be used to complete any backlog, and no pickups will occur after Dec. 30.

Also referred to as “forever chemicals,” PFAS has been proven in many studies to be cancer-causing for firefighters, who are at an exponentially higher risk of several kinds of cancers. PFAS chemicals can

adhere to clothing and enter the bloodstream through continued exposure. In 2020, Indiana passed a law to restrict the use of PFAS foams for any training purposes, with a very defined exception for facilities that have implemented “appropriate measures” to prevent the chemicals from reaching the environment. Groundwater sources are very susceptible to PFAS contamination.

Some departments have been hesitant to turn over PFAS foam stored at their locations, and the program does not replace the PFAS foam with a healthier and more effective option. However, the program eliminates significant disposal costs for departments that rarely need or use this type of material to fight routine fires. Keeping the material on hand only prolongs potential exposure to the firefighting community.

[Sign up today to ensure you make the pickup list.](#)



INDIANA NEEDS MORE WEATHER OBSERVERS FOR ENHANCED DATA COLLECTION

The Community Collaborative Rain, Hail and Snow Network (CoCoRaHS) seeks more weather observers across Indiana to help improve local weather data and forecasting accuracy. Observers only need an approved rain gauge and internet access to submit precipitation reports at their convenience. Participation in CoCoRaHS is open to the public and designed to be flexible. Seasonal participation is possible for those who leave Indiana in the winter.

Observers play a critical role in aiding local agriculture, emergency management and weather forecasting efforts. Currently, Cass and Adams counties have no observers. Benton, Fayette, Union, Martin, Scott, Ohio and Switzerland counties only have one observer each.

For more information on joining, visit [CoCoRaHS](#).

LISTEN TO THE IDHS PODCAST



Get ready for winter with “Hoosier Homeland.” Sit down with Sam Lashley from the National Weather Service (NWS) to learn about what Indiana’s winter season has in store. This episode covers snow and temperature predictions and provides insights into how past storms shaped this winter’s outlook, sharing what listeners need to know to stay safe and prepared.

Listen online at on.in.gov/hoosier-homeland or subscribe to the podcast using one of the podcast services below:



Bonus Episode: Make sure to tune into Lashley’s second episode where he introduces the NWS Hazards Simplification Project. It is an effort to make weather alerts more straightforward and actionable. Do not miss these episodes, packed with essential tips and updates to keep listeners ready for the season ahead!



IN FIRE DEPARTMENT DONATES FIRE ENGINE TO NC VOLUNTEERS

The firefighting family comes together in times of tragedy, no matter the distance or circumstance.

Following the devastating impact of Hurricane Helene in North Carolina, many departments lost vital equipment needed to protect their local communities. Some lost everything and others were struggling to meet the needs with only the bare minimum of resources.

Gerton Volunteer Fire and Rescue in Henderson County, North Carolina, suffered extreme mud and water damage to its stations and is fundraising to purchase ATVs, saws and other basic equipment to help its surrounding community recover.

The Gregg Township Fire Department (Morgan County, Indiana) donated a 2004 reserve engine to Gerton Fire, rather than sell the engine outright. The firefighters voted to donate the engine, which was loaded on a flatbed and delivered in late October.

Gerton Fire was contacted by the Office of the Indiana State Fire Marshal to arrange the donation. Gerton Fire Chief Robert “Jay” Alley said, “There have been so many times that we have struggled with what happens next, and God has blessed us with something. This truck was no exception to that.

“We are working to get everything ready to put it in service,” Alley added. “This truck has helped our ability to respond to our community and will help us for many years to follow.”





NEW ONLINE TOOLKIT ENHANCES VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

New, free online tools from the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) are poised to help Indiana fire departments overcome volunteer recruitment and retention obstacles.

Announced recently at the IERC Conference in coordination with the Indiana Fire Chiefs Association, the [Indiana Volunteer Firefighter Geospatial Recruitment and Retention Toolkit](#) is now available. The online kit consists of three surveys for Indiana firefighters to take and a [comprehensive dashboard](#) that gives agencies real-time survey results and up-to-date local data that can be used right away.

Two of the surveys help departments learn in depth about their current volunteers and new applicants to help build a profile for the type of people

who currently serve. The third allows fire departments to share their successful outreach events, giving other departments ideas about recruiting methods that are worth trying.

All three help both the local department and departments statewide, but “the data we get out of this is only as good as what goes into it,” said Megan Thiele, Indiana Fire Chiefs Association volunteer recruitment and retention grant manager.

Thiele emphasizes that every department in the state can benefit from the tool, and, as more firefighters take the survey, the better the insights will be. The dashboard shows live results of all surveys taken and can be viewed at the individual department level, though no firefighter names are collected.

“The toolkit, from beginning to end, will help with finding out who is volunteering and carry on to the next steps on who you need to



target, where they are and how to use that information, with the end result being we have an increase in volunteer firefighters,” Thiele said. “Take the survey so we can see who is currently serving. Tell us all about you.”

Firefighters from dozens of Indiana fire departments already have done so. Most of Kendallville Fire Department’s firefighters have taken the survey, and their information coupled with the dashboard’s community data (demographics, housing ages and types) have given the department direction in its recruitment efforts.

“A lot of our firefighters joined because they had family members in the service, but more and more now, it’s not that way. We can’t say, ‘Well, you should join because your brother did’ — we don’t have that anymore,” said Kendallville Volunteer Captain Chad McKinley. “You have to do community outreach because they aren’t coming to us anymore; we have to go to them.”

A local TV station recently covered the department’s call for more volunteers, and Fire Chief Jeremy McKinley said the public has been asking questions now about how the fire department works.

“They just assumed we have full-time members 24 hours a day, but we don’t. We’re fortunate to be a combination department, but our backbone is still volunteers. The toolkit is a great tool, because it helps us answer questions from citizens and our politicians who are asking questions now too,” said Chief McKinley, who added that four new volunteers have been added, which is “four more than we normally get.”

Chief McKinley also sees the toolkit as being useful for networking with other departments.

“It’s a good thing to measure apples to apples because we can see common areas. We may have the same type of community, so we can reach out and ask questions. In the fire service, everyone always wants to be the best, and we compare ourselves to the big fire departments in our area, but that’s not always apples to apples,” he said.

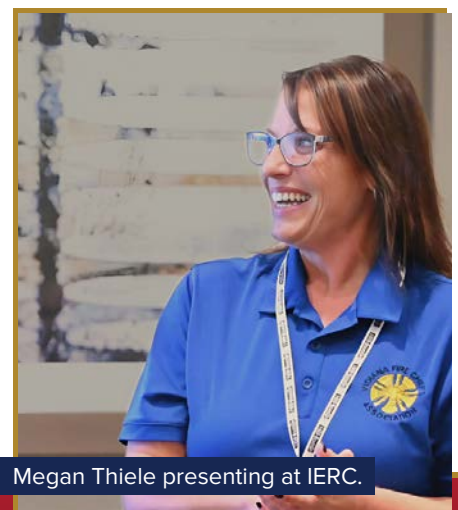
Indiana is the second state where the toolkit has been made available, and IAFC Senior Program Manager Ellen Lemieux believes it is set up for success. Building off lessons learned in North Carolina where it started, Indiana’s toolkit has been launched all at once instead of in

installments, so firefighters can immediately take the survey, see their results and community profile and use the data. Still, the key will be firefighter survey participation.

“The more people contribute to the toolkit, the better we can make it for everyone,” said Lemieux. “We want all current firefighters to take the survey and also want to capture what types of events have worked or not to help others.”

Lemieux said local demographics data will be updated every year going forward.

“It is important to see the changes and trends in your volunteers and in your community’s demographics so you can market to the newer generations,” said Indiana State Fire Marshal Steve Jones. “You can’t market like you did 25 years ago.”



Megan Thiele presenting at IERC.

GIS TOOLKIT DEMO

Departments that want a demonstration of the GIS toolkit may contact IAFC staff [Ellen Lemieux](#) or [Megan Thiele](#), who would welcome the opportunity to attend county fire chiefs meetings or Indiana Volunteer Firefighters Association meetings to share how to use the new kit.

INDIANA ANSWERS THE CALL



Photos provided by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources

Hoosier First Responders Helping Hurricane Survivors in Southern States

IN any kind of disaster response, local responders and officials rarely can handle it on their own. It takes a helping hand from people from across the county and state to come together to manage an incident. When an incident reaches an even larger scale, people from around the country are ready and waiting to help. Just like Indiana first responders were when North Carolina made the call.

Before Hurricane Helene even made landfall, states like Florida and North Carolina knew they were in trouble with the amount of wind and rain forecasted. The states started making Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) requests in the days leading up to the storm. IDHS and Indiana's first responders were quick to put a few teams together. Indiana sent a swiftwater rescue team, incident management team and the Indiana National Guard.

"I got a phone call from our staff in Indianapolis basically asking if I was going to be available. I figured out how to make it work here at home and then I got the call saying

we're good to go and get down to Indianapolis," described Indiana Department of Natural Resources Conservation Officer Alex Neel.

Neel was on the Type 1 Swiftwater Rescue Team consisting of personnel from the South Bend Fire Department, Goshen Fire Department, Mishawaka Fire Department and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. This group trains together regularly, making the transition from getting to the deployment an easy one, said South Bend Fire Department Battalion Chief Chris Baker.

"It's not like we just met these people. We've worked with these folks for years. So, we're all pretty tight-knit," said Baker.

The team was deployed to a town called Old Fort in McDowell County, North Carolina. It is a hilly, mountainous area that was downstream from where major parts of the hurricane hit.

"We actually were in a full day before the actual hurricane hit North Carolina," said Neel. "When it

The Emergency Management Assistance Compact offers assistance during governor-declared states of emergency or disasters through a system that allows states to send personnel, equipment and commodities to assist with response and recovery efforts in other states. All 50 states participate in the EMAC.

started to really go bad, we were already there, geared up and ready to go. We were out in the worst of it helping. We were there really when they needed a swiftwater team the most.”

“There was a lot of devastation,” said Baker. “There were houses moved; trailers moved. I’m not talking like knocked off the foundation. They were moved several hundred yards down through this area and pushed up against the highway and ravines.”

It was a dangerous situation for the people affected by the storm, but also for Indiana’s responders.

“There were still trees coming down, telephone lines, telephone poles. Parts of houses still being swept down the street,” described Baker. He also remembered a scene where part of the team made it to a few survivors, but because the water was moving so quickly, the raft was being pushed around too violently. Additional boats were deployed to get his team and the survivors needing rescued.

“It was catastrophic. In that community, everything that the water was able to get to, it absolutely destroyed. Every house that we saw was off foundations,” said Neel, while also describing how some people on his team saw a bridge wash away just minutes after they had crossed it.

Both Baker and Neel spoke about one rescue that resonated with them. After a long day transporting survivors and hard work clearing a path for rescue crews in the area, the team learned of a man stranded on the side of the mountain. His house was across a river and the bridge to his driveway had been washed away. By the time the team learned of the man, he had been stranded and injured for around 13 hours.



“Our guys realized the peril that this guy was in. So yeah, they rogered up and hopped in the boat and went across,” said Baker.

It was a tricky response because the team had to use a rope system to get down to the water, navigate across the water, hike up to the victim, carry him to the boat and get back to shore safely.



“Every skill that you’d ever learned in a swiftwater technician class was used on that incident,” Baker explained.

“That one rescue made the whole trip worth it because that gentleman was not getting out any other way than how we did it,” added Neel.

Once the survivors were taken from the scene, the swiftwater team took them to high ground where they would then be taken to shelters. During one drop-off, Neel noticed an elderly woman with a tight grip on her sandals.

“I was helping her up and she goes, ‘Don’t let me drop my sandals.’ I said, ‘I won’t, ma’am. Don’t worry.’ And she goes, ‘They’re all I have left,’” described Neel. “It just kind of really set how tragic this is for all those people who really have lost everything, and to think, man, she’s worried about her sandals. It just really set all of that in perspective on this is happening, and this is as bad as this really is.”

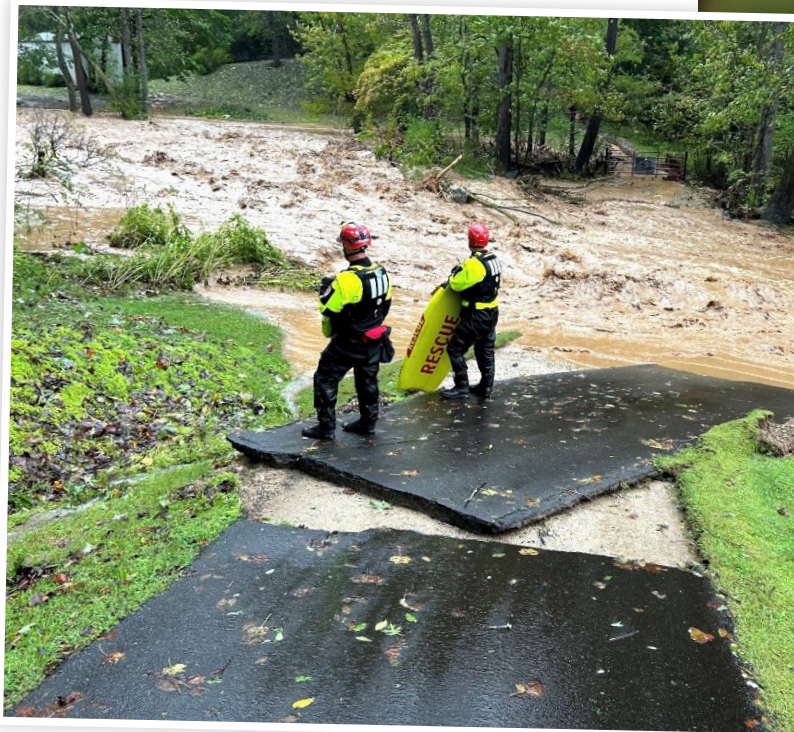
As fast as the flood waters rose, they were gone in a matter of hours, which changed the mission.

“Now basically what we’re dealing with is just a bunch of mud and silt that all washed down. So, imagine the street, then you got half this mountain and all the dirt coming down now packs up on the street, so there’s like two to three feet of mud,” said Baker.

The team continued to help with search and rescue, but being a swiftwater rescue team, they were not fully equipped to handle those types of missions. That is when new teams were brought in with the right equipment, allowing the swiftwater team to go home.

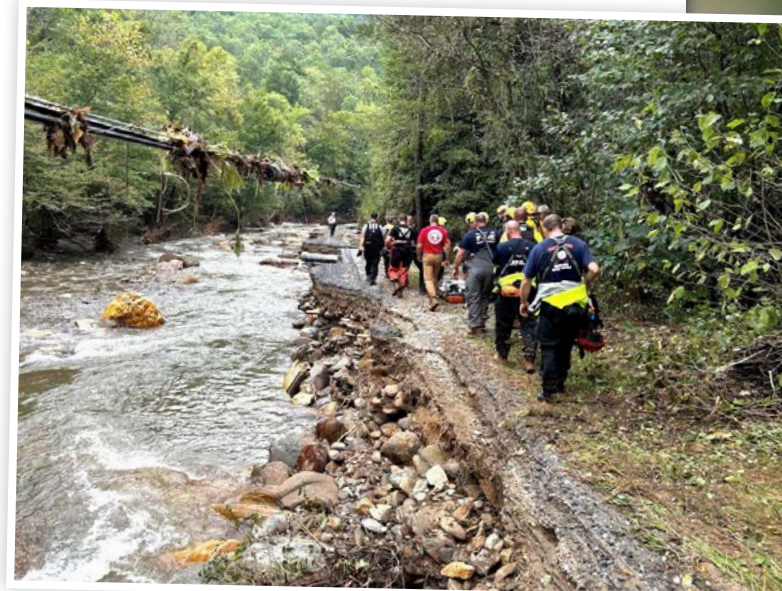
This event was Neel’s first deployment with this team and he is ready to keep serving.

“This is what we’ve trained for, and this is what we could do to help. All the people and everything that we were able to do made it worth it, 100%,” said Neel. “If that call ever comes again or when it comes again, I’ll be on that list.”



It is a sentiment that Baker echoed: “We’re trained to do this stuff. So, it’s kind of an obligation that we have to go and help somebody. It doesn’t matter if they’re in your local community, your community next to you or three states over.

“I think Indiana should be proud that they stepped up and answered the call. That’s from IDHS down,” said Baker. “It’s just a lot of different organizations coming together for the worst possible event and then being able to go out and do something great.”



HOW HOOSIERS CAN SUPPORT HURRICANE RELIEF EFFORTS

Responding to disasters of the magnitude of hurricanes Helene and Milton requires a highly coordinated effort. Roads are often impassable or unsafe, and the arrival of unplanned volunteers can strain ongoing operations.

“We know people want to help when they see fellow Americans in trouble,” said Mary Moran, director of Emergency Management at IDHS. “But we need to remind people that in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, going to the scene without coordinating through proper channels can put the volunteers in danger and pull first responders away from the true victims of the disaster.”

If you hear of organized efforts to help disaster survivors, remember that cash donations are the most effective way to assist in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Donated funds allow relief organizations to meet survivors’ specific and evolving needs

quickly and efficiently. FEMA offers a list of reputable organizations for those looking to contribute on the [Volunteer and Donate webpage](#).

Local organizations are another way Hoosiers can donate to help. Search for those organizations. In North Carolina, several trusted organizations were seeking donations and volunteers. The North Carolina Disaster Relief Fund, National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) and NC 211 provided avenues for financial contributions and organized volunteer efforts.

For more information on how to assist with relief efforts, visit FEMA’s [Volunteer and Donate webpage](#). Ensuring that donations and volunteers are part of coordinated efforts will allow responders to manage the crisis more effectively and reduce the risk of causing further complications in disaster-stricken areas.



INDIANA FIRST RESPONDERS CREATE PROGRAMS TO TEACH OTHERS ABOUT HOOSIERS WITH DISABILITIES

First responders know to expect people panicking at the scene of an emergency. When people call 911, they likely are experiencing one of the worst days of their life and emotions are running high. Responders have the challenge of calming everyone down while providing lifesaving care or services to ensure the scene is safe again.

But not all Hoosiers are alike in the way they handle emergencies. Two responders created programs to educate others on how to respond to emergencies involving people with autism spectrum disorder and Down syndrome. Both were inspired to create these programs because of their family members.

BEN'S BLUE BAGS

Crown Point Fire Department Captain Matt Kodicek is the man behind Ben's Blue Bags. His son, Ben, is the inspiration behind the course.

"Ben is 10 years old. He's very kind-hearted. He's very sweet. He likes people. He loves trains. I always tell people in the program, like no matter what kind of day he's having, he knows how to stay positive," described Kodicek. "Under levels of autism, he would be classified as a level two."

Autismspeaks.org describes Level Two autism as requiring substantial support for the person, who experiences deficits with verbal and nonverbal social communication skills.

Kodicek first created the Ben's Blue Bags program after reading about a similar program in Ohio, and he realized Indiana did not have the same kind of education. Initially, his goal was to create



Captain Kodicek begins his Ben's Blue Bags presentation.

bags full of items that can bring comfort to persons with autism while an emergency is happening.

“We utilize the sensory bag with different items that we can use as a distractor item that will hopefully calm them down,” explained Kodicek. “And along with giving that item to your patient, that item will allow them to refocus on that and now allow you to establish rapport.”

But as Kodicek started giving out the bags to responders, they started asking him questions about autism and the best ways to work with these patients.

“That basically forced me to put a presentation together that turned into about a 90-minute presentation about autism awareness,” said Kodicek.

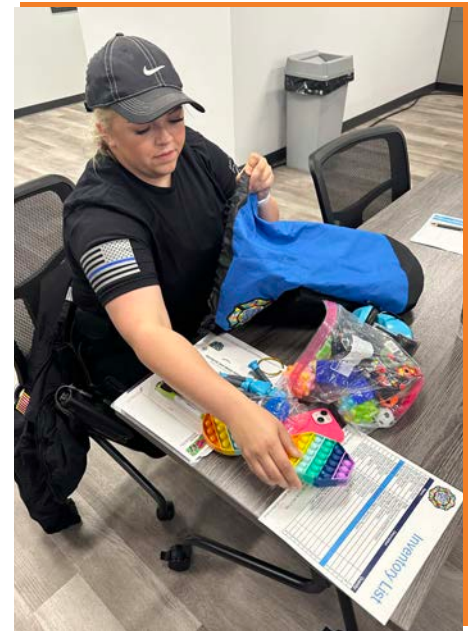
One way the autism spectrum disorder manifests itself is

overstimulation. People with autism may have a hard time when too many different things are happening at the same time, like on the scene of an emergency. Ben’s Blue Bags have tools that may help.

“We utilize these bags on a ton of different pediatric calls and special needs calls. When people are overstimulated and having a hard time, responders can give them something. Like it could be our earmuffs if it’s too loud,” said Kodicek.

Kodicek has been working with an organization called [Logan’s Love – Logan Speaks](#) (Logan’s Love) to provide Ben’s Blue Bags at no cost to first responders. All departments must do is schedule a time for Kodicek to give his presentation.

“I think having these programs to help people that are on the spectrum is beneficial



because we can better serve this population, and this population keeps growing,” explained Kodicek. “My hope is that Ben’s Blue Bags just becomes part of the care system, you know, similar to the way the LUCAS device has become part of EMS on cardiac arrest cases. It’s a tool that helps our first responders better help our citizens in the state.”



Ben Kodicek handing out Ben’s Blue Bags.



THE EMILY TALK

Superior Ambulance of Indiana Station Manager and Paramedic Tom Felter Jr. created The Emily Talk in honor of his daughter.

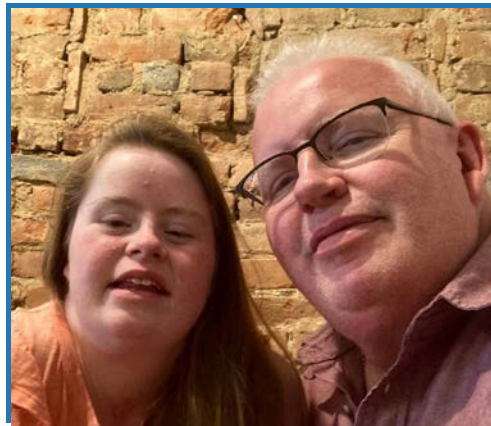
“Emily is my 29-year-old daughter. She was born with Down syndrome. We’ve spent 29 years learning how to be her parents,” said Felter.

He’s using that knowledge to educate his fellow first responders on how to interact with patients with Down syndrome.

“I can speak to the subject as the first responder. I can speak to the subject as the father of someone with a disability and try to help people understand how to interact with her safely so that

the first responders are safe and so that she’s safe,” said Felter.

He was initially empowered to create the course after hearing about [Ethan Saylor’s story](#). He was a 26-year-old man with Down syndrome who died after an interaction with a police officer. Saylor had gone to a movie with his caretaker. While



his caretaker went to get the car, Saylor decided he wanted to watch the movie again. He did not understand that he had to pay for another ticket. The police were called and the situation escalated from there, ultimately resulting in Ethan’s death.

“Ethan died over the cost of a movie theater ticket because he couldn’t understand the fact that he needed to leave,” said Felter. “Shortly thereafter I decided, because I’m an emergency responder and the father of someone who’s similar to Ethan Saylor, I need to do something about this. So, we developed The Emily Talk.”

Felter’s course explains what Down syndrome is and how



THE EMILY TALK

responders should approach patients with Down syndrome and other disabilities. “The first thing you should do is introduce yourself. Get down to their level. If they’re sitting, then you sit. If they’re lying on the ground, you lay down on the ground. I’ve done that. I had a patient who was lying on her stomach on the side of the highway on the shoulder. I got down next to her,” said Felter.

Felter’s class runs around 90 minutes long. He calls it more of a discussion where no question is off-limits. His daughter Emily is there at every class, but her involvement is up to her.

“She doesn’t always participate, but that works too. I want you to be able to talk to her if she decides to talk to you. I want you to be able to see how she interacts with me. I want you to

see how she’s going to maybe interact with you,” said Felter.

Felter’s class has expanded beyond first responders. He will talk to anyone to help educate them about people with Down syndrome.

“My hope is that they encounter somebody like Emily and it’s not scary for them or for Emily,” said Felter.

TEACHER OF PATIENCE

Northwest Indiana documentary filmmaker Carmen Vincent created a documentary about Emily and The Emily Talk called “Teacher of Patience.”

The documentary features a series of interviews with Felter and his wife, Tina, and allows viewers to experience Emily living her daily life.

Website: <https://www.teacherofpatience.com/>



HOW TO REQUEST A VISIT FROM BEN’S BLUE BAGS OR THE EMILY TALK

Both programs are operated by their creators during their free time. Scheduling a class may require some flexibility, but both men are eager to travel the state to provide these resources.

Contact Ben’s Blue Bags:

Email: bensbluebags@gmail.com

Website: <https://www.crownpoint.in.gov/468/Bens-Blue-Bags>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/bensbluebags>

Contact The Emily Talk:

Email: theemilytalk@gmail.com

Website: <https://www.theemilytalk.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TheEmilyTalk>



RESOURCES FOR DISASTER SURVIVORS

One big question for disaster victims is: What resources are available to help them recover? IDHS has compiled a list of valuable resources and agencies best equipped to get them the help they need.

All of this information is housed on the new [IDHS Disaster Resources for Survivors webpage](#).

GENERAL ASSISTANCE

Indiana 211 Partnership: Provides immediate help and access to community resources. 211 can help navigate housing issues and other services, including emergency shelters, employment services and counseling.

- Website: <https://in211.communityos.org/>
- Phone number: 211 or 1-866-211-9966

HOUSING ASSISTANCE

Indiana Housing Now: Find affordable, accessible and market-rate rental housing in communities across Indiana.

- Website: <https://www.indianahousingnow.org/>
- Toll-free bilingual call center: 1-877-428-8844, available Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. – 8 p.m. ET

HEALTH ASSISTANCE

Local health departments: Contact information for local health departments in Indiana. Available resources and services may vary.

- Website: <https://www.in.gov/health/lhd/local-health-department-map/>

Women, Infants and Children Nutrition Program (WIC): Provides access to nutritious foods and promotes healthier eating and lifestyles.

- Website: <https://www.in.gov/health/wic/>

Immunizations: Find information on immunization schedules for adults and children, vaccination records and where to receive vaccinations.

- Website for adults: <https://www.in.gov/health/immunization/adult-immunizations/>
- Website for children and teens: <https://www.in.gov/health/immunization/parents-and-patients/>

Disaster or Behavioral Health: Provides disaster behavioral health services to individuals in Indiana experiencing natural or human-caused disasters.

- Website: <https://www.in.gov/fssa/dmha/disaster-behavioral-health/>

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Offers a direct connection to compassionate, accessible care and support for anyone experiencing mental health-related distress.

- Website: <https://www.in.gov/fssa/dmha/update-on-988-in-indiana/>
- Phone number: 988

FOOD ASSISTANCE

Community Compass: Find food assistance in Indiana.

- Website: <https://www.communitycompass.app/about>

Feeding Indiana's Hungry: Find food banks across Indiana and learn more about state and federal food assistance programs.

- Website: <https://feedingindianahungry.org/>

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

(SNAP): Provides food assistance to low and no-income people and families living in the U.S. It is a federal aid program, but distribution of benefits occurs at the state level via the Indiana Family and Social Services Association.

Disaster survivors receiving SNAP benefits from another state need to contact the originating state to begin the transfer process to Indiana SNAP.

- Website: <https://www.in.gov/fssa/dfr/snap-food-assistance/about-snap/>

REMINDER



Fire departments and EMS providers need to be prepared for the upcoming launch of the National Emergency Response Information System (NERIS), which will replace the NFIRS system. The rollout begins later this year and will continue into 2025.

NERIS was built with a focus on compatibility to integrate easily with CAD systems, GIS programs and other dashboard-specific programs that fire and EMS departments rely heavily on to operate. NERIS will support state, local, territorial and tribal fire services by offering data and information that will be critical in effective and safe emergency response and will be essential in determining long-term community risk reduction strategies.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- [Basic NERIS information](#)
- [Beta testing process for NERIS rollout](#)
- [Subscribe to the USFA newsletter](#)
- [Follow USFA on social media](#)
- [Look for NERIS webinars](#)
- [Email the NERIS information desk](#)
- [Subscribe for updates from IDHS and the Indiana State Fire Marshal](#)
- [Embracing Change: The Transition to NERIS for Incident Reporting](#)

TORNADOES
FLOODING
EARTHQUAKES
HOUSE FIRES
DISASTERS
FOLLOW
NO SCHEDULE





RESIDENTIAL BURNING IN INDIANA

Indiana's air pollution control rules generally prohibit open burning, though there are certain agriculture and maintenance exceptions to the open burning rules. Smoke from burning household trash, including plastic containers, is more toxic than the smoke from burning clean wood. Residents are always encouraged to recycle rather than open burn. Protecting your health is worth the small fee for proper waste disposal.

These rules must always be followed for residential open burning:

- Only clean wood products may be burned. Treated wood is not clean wood.
- Wood products coated with stain, paint, preservatives, glue or other coatings are not allowed to be burned.
- Residential open burning of clean wood products shall be in a noncombustible and ventilated container.
- Recreational or ceremonial fires, such as fires for scouting activities or cooking, may only burn clean wood products, paper or charcoal.
- Burning must be done during safe weather conditions. View the [Burn Ban Map](#) to learn if conditions are favorable.
- Fires must be attended until completely extinguished, and adequate fire suppression equipment must be present.
- Non-recreational burning must be done during daylight hours and extinguished before sunset.
- Open burning is not allowed at mobile home parks, apartments, condominium complexes or buildings of more than four dwelling units.
- Fires must be extinguished if they create a fire hazard, nuisance, pollution problem or threat to public health.
- Burning must comply with all other federal, state and local laws, rules or ordinances.

Listen to the accompanying
“Hoosier Homeland” episode!



NWS HAZARD SIMPLIFICATION PROJECT BRINGS CLARITY FOR HOOSIERS

As severe weather events become increasingly common, the National Weather Service (NWS) is working to ensure its alerts are as clear and actionable as possible. The agency’s Hazard Simplification Project is a nationwide initiative to improve public understanding and response to weather alerts by refining the traditional Watch, Warning and Advisory (WWA) system.

For decades, the WWA system has been the go-to method for NWS to communicate the severity of weather events. However, feedback from the public and key partners, including emergency managers, indicated that some terms used in the system needed to be clarified.

“We’ve heard from not only the public but from emergency managers and media partners that there are just too many Weather

Service products,” said Sam Lashley, an NWS meteorologist. “The Hazard Simplification Project aims to streamline this.”

The primary goal is to support what the NWS calls a weather-ready nation in which everyone can better understand and respond to potential hazards. Through extensive social science research, including surveys of the public and partners, the NWS found that terminology like “Advisory” and “Special Weather

Statement” often left people unsure about what actions to take.

Lashley explained, “The NWS has done a great job working with social scientists in the last five to 10 years, who organized surveys that went out to the public, emergency management and media. The feedback led us to realize the importance of making these terms more straightforward.”

With this goal in mind, the project developed two significant approaches: Repair and Revamp.



REPAIR

The “repair” approach involves minor changes within the current system, such as consolidating similar alerts to reduce the number of products or messages and reformatting text to enhance clarity. For example, instead of having separate advisories for lake-effect snow and freezing rain, a consolidated “Winter Weather Advisory” now covers multiple hazards, with specific details listed in the alert.

REVAMP

The “revamp” approach focuses on significant structural changes, including the eventual elimination of the “Advisory” and “Special Weather Statement” categories altogether. In their place, the NWS plans to introduce plain-language headlines to simplify communication. This shift will take effect no sooner than 2025, with a phased rollout planned for several years.

Hoosiers can expect these adjustments in local weather alerts over the next few years. The new system will maintain familiar terms like “Watch” and “Warning.” Still, updates will offer more straightforward and intuitive headlines for other weather events.

“Instead of reading through jargon or complicated terms, the new format will allow users to quickly understand what to expect,” said Lashley.

To further enhance ease of use, the NWS will adopt a structured format within alerts — listing what, where, when and additional details — which will allow people to quickly identify the critical information they need. This format standardizes how alerts appear nationwide and enables weather information to be more easily integrated into digital platforms and broadcasts.

One anticipated improvement is for TV meteorologists, who play

a critical role in relaying timely information during severe weather. “For our media partners, it’s a nice clean map,” Lashley said.

“Any improvement that allows Hoosiers to take action faster in the face of a weather emergency will make a major difference,” said Mary Moran, IDHS Emergency Management director. “This change also will help IDHS be able to work with our stakeholders better because we can all be on the same page when preparing for weather events with the potential for a major impact.”

One of the most notable benefits of the simplification project is the removal of inconsistencies that can occur when different NWS offices issue advisories based on varying criteria. Previously, neighboring offices might issue conflicting advisories for the same weather event based on localized criteria.

“With the future plain language statements, we would all have a

statement in effect, but each office would convey what it’s for and our local impacts,” explained Lashley. This approach should lead to greater consistency in alerts across different regions.

While changes are expected to happen gradually, winter weather forecasts are already piloting some of these new formats. The NWS anticipates the full rollout will take several years due to the logistical and technical adjustments required.

“Timelines are fluid and subject to change, but we’re excited about the potential for these improvements to make weather alerts simpler and more actionable,” noted Lashley.

By eliminating outdated jargon and adopting clear language, the NWS hopes Hoosiers and others across the country will be better equipped to make timely decisions during severe weather.

NEW BURN BAN AND TRAVEL ADVISORY MAPS

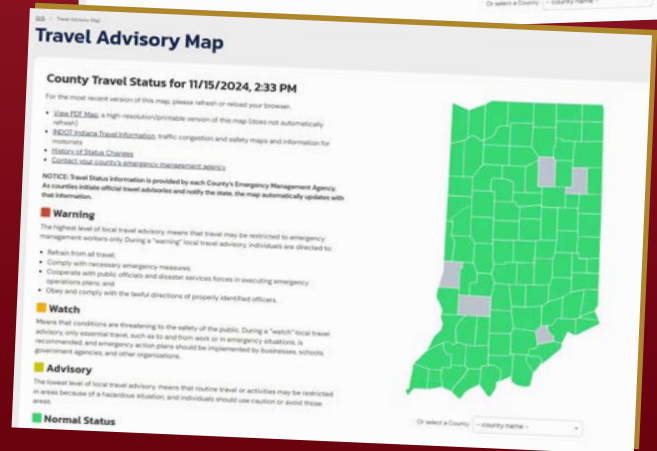
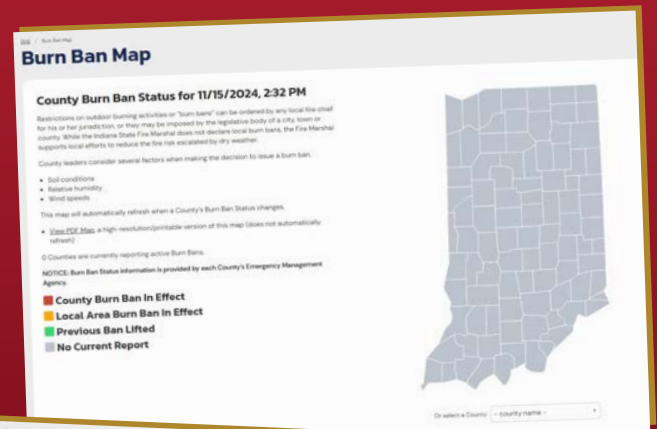
The [Burn Ban](#) and [Travel Advisory](#) maps on the IDHS website received an upgrade and will look different the next time you visit those webpages.

What Is Staying the Same

- The functionality of the maps
- Automatic updates based on data provided by stakeholders and decision-makers

What Has Changed

- The look and color scheme
- The URLs
 - <https://www.in.gov/dhs/burn-ban-map>
 - <https://www.in.gov/dhs/travel-advisory-map>
- The old URLs will redirect to the new maps



NONPROFIT SECURITY GRANT PROGRAM – NATIONAL SECURITY SUPPLEMENTAL (NSGP-NSS)

[NSGP-NSS](#) is a competitive reimbursement grant program intended to provide federal funding for physical security enhancements and other security-related activities to nonprofit organizations that are at risk of a terrorist attack. The NSGP-NSS seeks to integrate the preparedness activities of nonprofit organizations with broader state and local preparedness efforts.

The NSS supplemental funding previously was allocated as part of

the Israel Security Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2024.

The NSGP-NSS includes two pools of funding for registered 501(c)(3) organizations:

- NSS-S (State = all counties other than Marion and Hamilton counties)
- NSS-UA (Urban Area = Marion and Hamilton counties ONLY)

Please be sure to complete the correct application based on your location: S for all counties other than Marion and Hamilton or UA for Hamilton and Marion counties only. The application

should be downloaded FIRST before completing and then sent to grants@dhs.in.gov as an email attachment by 5 p.m. ET on Jan. 6, 2025.

Due to the deadline to return applications to FEMA, the application period for NSGP-NSS funding will be short. All proposed projects are capped at \$200,000.

Full program details can be found at the [NSGP-NSS webpage on the Indiana Department of Homeland Security's website](#).



WHEN THE SMOKE CLEARS

An IDHS Video Series on First Responder Mental Health

“When the Smoke Clears” is a four-part video series produced by the Indiana Department of Homeland Security (IDHS), discussing the mental health challenges faced by first responders. It provides valuable insights into identifying signs of depression, PTSD and substance abuse within the firefighting community. The videos, led by a panel of experts, promote open conversations about mental health and offer guidance on when to step in and seek professional help.

Departments, leadership and first responders play crucial roles in fostering a supportive environment and prioritizing mental wellness. All public safety personnel are encouraged to watch and share the “When the Smoke Clears” series. With the holiday season approaching, now is an ideal time to focus on the well-being of those who serve on the front lines. The complete series is available on [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and the [IDHS Behavioral Health webpage](#).

To submit a topic idea, please email pio@dhs.in.gov.



MESSAGE FROM THE FIRE MARSHAL

As the Indiana State Fire Marshal, I am intensely interested in the health of our workforce, especially the real, growing threat of various exposure-related cancers. A 2024 study conducted by the San Antonio Fire Department (SAFD) revealed alarming statistics about health care providers' awareness of firefighter cancer risks:



- Only 4% of surveyed providers passed a basic firefighter cancer knowledge quiz.
- Only 18% of providers scored higher than 50% on the quiz.
- The majority of health care providers surveyed demonstrated limited knowledge about skin cancer in firefighters and were unaware of the major occupational risks affecting the profession.

These findings underscore the urgent need for improved education and awareness among health care professionals who play a crucial role in our health and well-being. As firefighters, we should not hesitate to ask tough questions and encourage our own doctors to explore scientifically-backed studies related to our profession.

Firefighters face an elevated risk of various types of cancer, including skin cancer, due to exposure to fireground carcinogens, UV radiation and other occupational hazards. Despite the known risk factors, agencies like the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force do not include recommendations for routine skin cancer screenings specifically for firefighters in their general guidelines.

To address this knowledge gap and improve the care of our firefighting workforce, I propose the following actions:

1. **Develop Educational Programs:** Create targeted educational materials and programs for health care providers about firefighters' unique health risks and cancer prevention strategies.
2. **Collaborate with Medical Institutions:** Partner with medical schools, hospitals and continuing education programs to incorporate firefighter-specific health information into their curricula.
3. **Organize Awareness Events:** Host regular "Firefighter Cancer Prevention and Wellness Fairs" like the one conducted by SAFD, inviting health care providers to learn about the health challenges of firefighting.
4. **Advocate for Specialized Screening Protocols:** Work with medical associations and policymakers to develop and implement cancer screening protocols tailored to firefighters' occupational hazards.
5. **Encourage Open Communication:** Foster dialogue between firefighters and their health care providers about occupational risks and the importance of regular cancer screenings.

Perhaps more importantly, know your risks and advocate for yourself in your health care. Request regular health screenings and be diligent about protecting yourself with the right PPE while on the job. Along with mental health, the cancer risks of firefighting are not something we can remain quiet about anymore.

By working together to educate our medical professionals and taking proactive steps to manage our health, we can create a safer, healthier future for our firefighting community.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen Jones". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name and last name clearly distinguishable.

Stephen Jones
Indiana State Fire Marshal



UPCOMING TRAININGS

DECEMBER

DEC 2-3	ICS 400: Advanced ICS Command & General Staff	COLUMBUS
DEC 2-8	Surface Water Rescue Operations	CRAWFORDSVILLE
DEC 4 - JAN 3	Fire Officer Strategy and Tactics	ANDERSON
DEC 13	K9220: Basic Tracking/Trailing Tech. for K-9s	BRAZIL
DEC 14 - MAR 15	Fire Investigator I	VALPARAISO
DEC 17	Interview Training for Fire Investigators	INDIANAPOLIS

JANUARY

JAN 13 - JUN 18	Emergency Medical Technician - EMT0592	SCOTTSBURG
JAN 20 - NOV 20	EMS - Paramedic	INDIANAPOLIS

FEBRUARY

FEB 25-26	Surface Transportation Emergency Preparedness and Security for Freight by Rail or Highway	ASHLEY
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UPCOMING EVENTS



NATIONAL INFLUENZA VACCINATION WEEK DECEMBER 2-6

This week raises awareness about flu vaccinations and promotes public health by encouraging residents to get vaccinated. This helps to prevent flu outbreaks and reduce hospital strain during flu season.



HANUKKAH DECEMBER 25 - JANUARY 2

Hanukkah is the Jewish festival of lights, celebrated for eight days. It begins Dec. 25, 2024, and ends Jan. 2, 2025. Celebrations involve lighting menorahs, prayers and gatherings.

KWANZAA DECEMBER 26 - JANUARY 1

Kwanzaa is an African American cultural holiday celebrated from Dec. 26 to Jan. 1, emphasizing unity, culture and heritage.



SAFE TOYS & GIFTS MONTH DECEMBER

Safe Toys and Gifts Month encourages consumers to choose safe, age-appropriate gifts for children. This initiative helps reduce preventable injuries during the holiday season.



HOLIDAY SEASON DRUNK DRIVING CAMPAIGN HOLIDAY SEASON

This campaign runs through the holiday season and involves law enforcement crackdowns on impaired driving.

NEW YEAR'S DAY JANUARY 1

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY JANUARY 20

Martin Luther King Jr. Day, celebrated on the third Monday in January, honors the civil rights leader.

NATIONAL RADON ACTION MONTH JANUARY

January is National Radon Action Month, aimed at raising awareness about the dangers of radon exposure by encouraging homeowners to test for radon, a leading cause of lung cancer, and take mitigation steps.



*The Indiana Department of Homeland Security works 24/7
to protect the people, property and prosperity of Indiana.*



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Please direct any questions or comments to the IDHS Office of Public Affairs at 317.234.6713 or pio@dhs.in.gov