



Ontario Association of Fire Chiefs Large Urban Committee Meeting Minutes

The Ontario Association of Fire Chiefs mission is to lead innovation and excellence in public and life safety. Our vision is to inspire and influence a safer Ontario.

Zoom Meeting

<https://zoom.us/j/93574641532?pwd=T0s2aXZoUGlOcHU3dnN3VU1RRm5pUT09>

Meeting ID: 935 7464 1532

Tuesday, February 9, 2021, 2pm

Attendees: Mark MacDonald, Paul Hutt, Steve Kraft, Stephen Laforet, Adam Grant, Mike Doyle, Brad Boyes, Dave Cunliffe, Lori Hammer, Kim Ayotte, Paul Boissonneault, Deryn Rizzi, Michelle O'Hara

Guests: None

Minute Taker: Mark Tishman

1. Welcome – Committee Chair

- Mark MacDonald provided welcoming remarks and comments.

2. Brief update on the PAC meetings – Closure of the Fire College, Modernization of Training

- Michelle noted a few PAC meetings still need to talk place, but common themes have developed around costs, oversight, accessibility, etc. There is no reason a RTC must stay open if they are not making a profit.
- Mark MacDonald noted that while a lot of departments use the OFC, just as many do not, but at the end of the day, it is still 2,500 annual training spots.
- There were no consultations about the decision to close the OFC and we were told this was due to employment contracts and CBAs of OFC staff.
- Most fire chiefs will agree that training needed to change. In theory chiefs are responsible for services delivered under the FPPA, so give chiefs the ability to train, and test to their needs, audit as much as you'd like.
- RTC's are under no obligations to "help their neighbours".
- All viewpoints and discussions surrounding firefighter training should be on the table.
- It was noted that certification keeps getting raised in the background, and the status of firefighter certification was asked.



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- The OAFCh believes that certification is still on the table. The OAFCh supports certifying responders to the levels of service provided.
- The OPFFA's two biggest current asks are 1) Certification 2) Simultaneous Dispatch. However, it does seem like the OPFFA is 'scaling back' the certification requirements for smaller and rural departments, so they may be slowly getting on board.
- All departments would need to be on board for certification. It will be expensive.
- Most large departments are already training to a minimum certification standard, but often higher.

3. Election/Appointment of Large Urban Co-Chair

- Those interested in running for the Chair position for the Large Urban Committee were asked to put their names forward. Chief Boyes was the only individual.

Motion: To acclaim Chief Boyes as the co-chair for the OAFCh Large Urban Committee 2021 Term.

Moved by: Kim Ayotte

Second By: Dave Cunliffe

Carried.

4. Discussion Committee Goals for 2021

- Last year the committee chose to look into "greening" fire department vehicles and the NFPA 1006 curriculum.
- Mark Tishman provided a bit of background as the greening fire vehicles was more an inquiry than committee goal. One Large Urban Chief had been requested by their municipality to look into making fire departments more environmentally friendly. Research into electric fire apparatus was conducted, but the sector is moving very slowly in this field.
- The 1006 course is close to completion.
- Discussions over joint meeting or type of joint labour with the OPFFA to strengthen our relationship was discussed.
- It was agreed that the committee will focus on finalizing NFPA 1006 and a joint labour management event with the OFPPA and potentially others.

Action Item: Chief Boyes to flesh out the joint labour event with the OPFFA.



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- Michelle noted that the O AFC OSI WG is still working on the four-pillar approach and were hoping to partner with the Ontario Psychological Association. The O AFC is focusing more on prevention as by the time WSIB is involved, it's too late and the individual is in crisis, we want to help people before they get to that state.

5. Meeting Schedule 2021

- February 9 at 14:00
- April 13 at 14:00
- June 8 at 14:00
- August – Summer Break
- October 12 at 14:00
- December 14 at 14:00

6. Round Table – Emerging issues/New business

- The current vaccination rollout strategy was discussed.

Action Item: Chief Boyes to share the Peel vaccination strategy with Chief Laforet.

Action Item: To add the below article on cancer from PPE to the next LU agenda - https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/climate/pfas-firefighter-safety.html?campaign_id=57&emc=edit_ne_20210126&instance_id=26443&nl=evening_briefing®i_id=93548386&segment_id=50334&te=1&user_id=053c4b346897f43fc71b48b9cf958618

(Article copied at the end of the meeting minutes for ease)

7. Adjournment

Chief Boyes moved to adjourn the meeting at 3:12pm



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Firefighters Battle an Unseen Hazard: Their Gear Could Be Toxic



By Hiroko Tabuchi

- Published Jan. 26, 2021 Updated Jan. 28, 2021

Every day at work for 15 years, Sean Mitchell, a captain in the Nantucket Fire Department, has put on the bulky suit that protects him from the heat and flames he faces on the job. But last year, he and his team came across unsettling research: Toxic chemicals on the very equipment meant to protect their lives could instead be making them gravely ill.

This week, Captain Mitchell and other members of the International Association of Fire Fighters, the nation’s largest firefighters’ union, are demanding that union officials take action. They want independent tests of PFAS, the chemicals in their gear, and for the union to rid itself of sponsorships from equipment makers and the chemical industry. In the next few days, delegates representing the union’s more than 300,000 members are expected to vote on the measure — a first.

“We’re exposed to these chemicals every day,” Captain Mitchell said. “And the more I looked into it, the more it felt like the only people who were saying these chemicals were safe were the people who make it.”

The demands come as the safety of firefighters has become an urgent concern amid the worsening effects of climate change, which bring rising temperatures that prime the nation for increasingly devastating fires. In October, two dozen firefighters in California — where [a record 4.2 million acres](#) burned across the state last year — filed suit against 3M, Chemours, E.I. du Pont de Nemours and other manufacturers, claiming that the companies for decades knowingly



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made and sold firefighting equipment loaded with toxic chemicals without warning of the chemicals' risks.

"Firefighting is a dangerous occupation, and we don't want our firefighters to burn up. They need that protection," said Linda Birnbaum, the former director of the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences. "But we now know that PFAS is in their gear, and it doesn't stay in their gear."

"A lot of it migrates out and gets into the air that they're breathing, and it's on their hands, and their bodies," Dr. Birnbaum added. "If they take their gear home to wash, they're bringing PFAS back to their families."

DuPont said it was "disappointed" with firefighters seeking to ban sponsorships and that its commitment to the profession was "unwavering." 3M said it had "acted responsibly" on PFAS and remained committed to working with the union. Chemours declined to comment.

The risks of chemicals in firefighting equipment may seem to pale in comparison to the deadly flames, smoke-filled buildings or forest infernos that firefighters brave on the job. But over the past three decades, cancer has emerged as [the leading cause of death](#) for firefighters across the country, making up 75 percent of active-duty firefighter deaths in 2019.

[Studies undertaken by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#) have found that firefighters have a 9 percent higher risk of getting cancer and a 14 percent higher risk of dying from the disease than the general United States population. Firefighters are most at risk for testicular cancer, mesothelioma and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and rates haven't declined, health experts point out, even though firefighters in the United States now use air packs similar to scuba gear to protect themselves from a fire's toxic fumes.

"It's not the traditional line-of-duty death, the firefighter falling through the floor, or the roof collapsing on us," said Jim Burneka, a firefighter in Dayton, Ohio, who also runs Firefighter Cancer Consultants, which works with fire departments across the country to reduce cancer risks to their staffs. "It's a new kind of line-of-duty death. It's still the job that kills us. It's just we die with our boots off."

Though it is difficult to establish direct links between exposure to chemicals and cancer, particularly in individual cases, health experts have warned that exposure to chemicals is increasing firefighters' cancer risks. One culprit: the foams that firefighters use to fight particularly hazardous blazes. Some states have moved to ban their use.



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But [a study published last year](#) by researchers at the University of Notre Dame found significant quantities of similar chemicals in firefighters' protective clothing, applied to keep the clothes water-resistant. The researchers found that those chemicals were shedding from the clothing or in some cases migrating into the coat's inner layers.

The chemicals in question belong to a class of synthetic compounds, called [per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS](#), found in a range of products including fast-food containers and furniture. Sometimes called "forever chemicals" because they don't fully degrade in the environment, PFAS have been linked to [a host of health effects](#), including cancer, liver damage, decreased fertility, asthma and thyroid disease.

And while some forms of PFAS are being phased out, the replacements have not been proven to be safer, said Graham F. Peaslee, a professor in experimental nuclear physics, chemistry and biochemistry at Notre Dame who led the study.

"It's one more risk factor, but it's one that we can eliminate, whereas you can't eliminate the risk of running into a burning building," Dr. Peaslee said. "And firefighters aren't told about this. So they're wearing it, they're lounging in it when they're between calls," he said. "That's chronic exposure, and that's not good."

Doug W. Stern, a media relations executive with the International Association of Fire Fighters, said that it has been policy and practice for years that members wear fire gear only for fires or emergency calls.

The Biden administration has said it would make PFAS a priority. In campaign documents, President Biden pledged to designate PFAS as a hazardous substance to make manufacturers and other polluters pay for cleanup, and set a national drinking water standard for the chemical. New York, Maine and Washington have moved to ban PFAS from food packaging, and other bans are in the works.

"There's a need to drive PFAS out of everyday products, like food and cosmetics, textiles, carpets," said Scott Faber, senior vice president for government affairs for the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit group that works on environmental health. "Firefighters are disproportionately exposed, on top of all that."

Lt. Ron Glass, president of the Orlando Professional Firefighters union, who has been a firefighter for a quarter-century, has lost two of his peers to cancer in the past year. "When I first got hired, the leading cause of death was a line-of-duty fire accident, then it was heart attacks," he said. "Now it's all cancers."



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“Initially, everybody blamed the different materials burning, or the foam. Then we started digging a little deeper into it and started looking at our bunker gear,” he said. “The manufacturers initially told us there’s nothing wrong, there’s nothing harmful at all. But it turns out there’s PFAS not only on the outer shell, but in the interior lining, which goes against our skin.”

Lieutenant Glass and his colleagues are now pressing the International Association of Fire Fighters, which represents firefighters and paramedics in the United States as well as Canada, to run further tests. Their formal resolution, submitted this week to the union’s annual convention, also asks the union to work with manufacturers to develop safer alternatives.

Captain Mitchell, meanwhile, is pressing the union to refuse future sponsorships from chemicals and equipment manufacturers, money he feels has slowed action on the issue. In 2018, the union received about \$200,000 from companies including the fabrics manufacturer W.L. Gore and equipment maker MSA Safety, records show.

Mr. Stern pointed out that the union supports research into PFAS exposure science as it relates to fire gear and is working with researchers on three major studies, one on PFAS in firefighters’ blood, one studying dust in fire stations to determine PFAS levels, and a third on testing firefighting gear for PFAS. The union also supports other researchers as they apply for grants to study PFAS issues, he said.

W.L. Gore said it remained confident in the safety of its products. MSA Safety did not respond to a request for comment.

Another obstacle is that manufacturers hold prominent positions at the body that oversees standards for firefighting gear, the National Fire Protection Association. Half the members of a committee that oversees protective-clothing and equipment standards, for example, [are from industry](#). A spokeswoman for the group said the committees represented a “balanced variety of interests, including the fire service.”

Diane Cotter — whose husband, Paul, a firefighter in Worcester, Mass., was told seven years ago that he had cancer — was among the first to raise the concerns over PFAS in the gear. Her husband had just been promoted to lieutenant in September 2014, after 27 years of service. “But in October, his career was over,” Ms. Cotter said. “He had his cancer diagnosis. And I can’t tell you how shocking that was.”

She had heard that European firefighters were moving away from PFAS use, but when she started writing manufacturers in the United States, she “couldn’t get any answers,” she said.



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Action by the union is important, she said, though it would be too late for her husband. “The hardest thing is that he can’t return to work,” Ms. Cotter said.

Correction: Jan. 26, 2021

An earlier version of this article misidentified the city where Paul Cotter worked as a firefighter. It is Worcester, Mass., not Dayton.

Hiroko Tabuchi is an investigative reporter on the climate desk. She was part of the Times team that received the 2013 Pulitzer for explanatory reporting. [@HirokoTabuchi](#) · [Facebook](#)