

Considerations for Building On-duty Exercise Policies



FIT TO THRIVE / F2T

When drafting a departmental, on-duty exercise policy, the factors listed below can help guide stakeholders to construct policies that best suit an organization's local context and the objectives it seeks to attain. On-duty exercise policies are not recipes that can be replicated across departments. There are, however, common components that should be included in all policies, and best practices that should be followed when facilitating physical activity and exercise on duty. The considerations listed below are certainly not exhaustive but represent some central issues/components that should be considered and included in an on-duty exercise policy.

1. SCHEDULING & PARTICIPATION

- **Consideration should be given to when exercise is permitted, or not across the day.**
 - For example, is exercise permitted to take place at any point in the day? Only during specific, pre-assigned windows (e.g., after morning duties, etc.)?
- **Consideration should be given to exercise duration.**
 - For example, is exercise limited to a certain duration? Conversely, are fire fighters permitted to exercise for as long as they want/need within reasonable limits (e.g., no interruption to primary duties, etc.)?
- **Consideration should be given to what extent exercise time is "protected" outside of emergency response and other scheduled duties (e.g., training).**
 - For example, if a fire fighter is exercising can he/she be interrupted and required to perform a non-emergent task?
 - Is exercise on duty treated as a recreational activity that is allowed to be squeezed in when possible? Or is it approached more deliberately?
- **Consideration should be given to conditions pertaining to participation.**
 - Is participation mandatory or voluntary? If there is a designated time slot for exercise, must all crew members participate? Similarly, if exercise is permitted to take place at any time during the day, must members participate, or is participation optional?
 - How is participation defined? For example, is participation defined in terms of a wide variety of physical activity and exercise modalities (e.g., strength training, stretching, walking, yoga), or is it more constrained?

Key Takeaways and Best Practices

- Care should be taken to understand the existing attitudes and preferences towards physical activity & exercise on-duty, and the current strategies being adopted. In the absence of a formal policy, it is likely that fire fighters are finding adaptive solutions to their existing operational tempo that can inform policy decisions.
- Scheduling policies might need to be flexible to accommodate differing call demands across the department. For example, a set, 1-hour exercise time might be impossible for a busy station but perhaps preferred at a slower one.
- It is highly recommended that restrictive policies are avoided. For example, a policy that states that a crew must exercise together, or not at all is a poorly constructed policy. It discourages fire fighters who want to invest in their health.
- It is highly recommended that policies are not punitive. For example, if a department wants to employ a mandatory policy, defining participation on a broad continuum to include low-intensity, low-barrier-to-entry activities (e.g., mobility, foam-rolling, etc.), will afford more opportunity for engagement and allow everyone to "do something".

2. LOCATION & ENVIRONMENT

- **Consideration should be given to the locations where exercise is permitted, or not.**
 - For example, are crews/individuals permitted to leave the station to access outside facilities, whether they be public or private?
 - If crews/individuals are permitted to leave the station to access outside facilities are policies required to address transportation to and from the facilities?
 - The IAFF considers the apparatus bay as a "Hot Zone" within the fire station which deems the area as highly contaminated due to diesel exhaust and other particulate related to firefighting. Therefore, at no time should exercise occur in the apparatus bay.
- **Consideration should be given to the current gym spaces in stations as well as the built environment in and immediately surrounding stations.**
 - For example, are the currently available gym spaces (if they do, in fact, exist) sufficient and safe to support exercise on duty?
 - Does the built environment (the station itself and the area immediately surrounding the station) afford opportunities to engage in physical activity safely and efficiently?

Key Takeaways and Best Practices

- Conducting an audit of the available gym spaces (if they exist) across the department will ensure that there isn't mismatch between policies and available resources.
- Although gym spaces are an integral resource for enabling exercise on duty, physical activity and other movement-based practices (e.g., form rolling, stretching, yoga, etc.), can be conducted in other spaces, and the built environment might enable other forms of physical activity (e.g., walking, stair climbing)
- We encourage departments to ensure that fire fighters have access to exercise spaces that are up to standard, contaminant free, and don't impose unnecessary barriers to access.



3. EXERCISE SPECIFIC ISSUES

- **Considerations should be given to the types of exercise and physical activity permitted on duty.**
 - For example, are team sports permitted (e.g., ball hockey, volleyball, pickleball, etc.)?
- **Consideration should be given to group-based exercise vs. individual exercise.**
 - How does the policy address these two different forms of exercise?
- **Consideration should be given to exercise intensity.**
 - For example, is there any guidance regarding putting forth maximal efforts in either strength- or work capacity-based activities?
 - Does the policy need to explicitly address the possible risks that severe exercise bouts pose to operational readiness?
- **Consideration should be given to exercising wearing gear or utilizing other tools.**
 - Like concerns with exercising in the apparatus bay, PPE and tools also can be vectors for exposure. The IAFF does not endorse donning PPE for purposes other than emergency response and certain departmental training evolutions.

Key Takeaways and Best Practices

- A general best practice when drafting an exercise policy is not to introduce limitations to engaging in activity. As already discussed, defining exercise and physical activity in broad terms can promote engagement. Team sports not only afford the opportunity to be physically active but are also enjoyable and build camaraderie. However, the injury risks of engaging in team sports can be elevated especially for deconditioning members. Departments should consider the trade-offs inherent in allowing team sport participation.
- A very strong recommendation, however, is that if team sports are permitted, and injuries do occur, that leaders do not overreact and reduce or revoke the ability to exercise on duty. Stakeholders must weigh and select a risk profile that suits their objectives when crafting a policy.
- The fire service has a strong culture of teamwork, and so group exercise is natural fit. At the same time, some members might prefer to exercise in a more self-directed way, and accommodating varying levels of fitness in group sessions requires programming skill. It is recommended that there isn't a strict policy around group vs. individual exercise. Such decisions can be left to crews.
- Given the risks associated with wearing PPE for extended durations and handling tools and SCBAs that have had repeated fire ground exposures, exercise should not be undertaken with these props.

4. HEALTH & SAFETY

Considerations should be given to how injuries that occur as a direct result of exercising on duty are handled.

- For example, if a member incurs an injury while exercising, is it considered a work-related injury and handled via workers compensation?
- **Considerations should be given to education and support provided to fire fighters on how to exercise in a safe and effective manner.**
 - For example, does the policy need to make provisions for education and training on safe and effective lifting mechanics?
 - In what other ways can the policy support fire fighters to engage in exercise safely and reduce injury risk?
- **Consideration should be given to environmental conditions that impact the physiological response to exercise.**
 - For example, does the policy address the risks of exercising in extreme heat, and how to determine safe environmental conditions?
- **Considerations should be given to the maintenance and upkeep of exercise spaces.**
 - Spaces and equipment used for exercise should be kept free of risks and equipment should be kept in working order.

Key Takeaways and Best Practices

- It is recommended that stakeholders become aware of how state/provincial workers' compensation boards treat injuries that occur when exercising on duty. Understanding how existing coverage is defined can inform policy decisions.
- There is inherent injury risk to exercise and physical activity. Even though the trade-off between the positive health and fitness benefits of regular exercise far exceeds this injury risk, departments nonetheless must make active efforts to limit exercise-related injuries. For example, there is an established relationship between how exercise movements are performed and the pattern and magnitude of loading on the body. Educating and training fire fighters on the effective execution of common exercise-related movement patterns, as well as how to influence their movement patterns via coaching and exercise, can reduce injury risk. Support for the implementation of such education and training should be reflected in exercise policies.
- Addressing environmental factors that influence injury risk is also an effective approach to injury risk management. Departments are encouraged to craft policies that anticipate and mitigate these risks in their local contexts.

To draft informed policies multiple stakeholder groups must be involved in the process. As the eventual end-users of the policy, fire fighters should be consulted to gather data and provide feedback and select fire fighter representatives should also be included on ad hoc committees tasked with drafting policies. Other important stakeholders include a department's executive leaders, union leaders, existing departmental fitness and health leaders (e.g., Peer Fitness Trainers, Athletic Trainers, Exercise Physiologists, etc.), and health and safety leaders (e.g., Training officers, members of the health and safety committee, etc.). Integrating the perspectives of all these stakeholders will ensure that policies fit into the existing culture, operational realities, and available resources in a department.