

# The more things stay the same, the more they need to change



**JANET WILMOTH**

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Occasionally, I like to thumb through old issues of FIRE CHIEF. Doing so reminds me of how much progress has been made in the fire service. Still, each time I do it, I find several topics that linger on like toxins in the soil.

**Unbuckled firefighters still are dying.** Last year, 18 firefighters died in vehicle crashes. Of those, nine weren't wearing their seatbelts — that's three times as many as in 2011. Seatbelts have been around for a half century, yet we're still losing firefighters who refuse to buckle up while riding in fire apparatus and private vehicles. These are men and women who grew up wearing seatbelts and therefore should know better. Chiefs who tolerate unbuckled firefighters should be ashamed of themselves.

**The two-hatter debate still rages.** Alan Brunacini has asked many times: "Does Mrs. Smith ever ask whether the responder is a career or volunteer?" No. Are career firefighters and "professional" firefighters the same thing? I don't think so. I've seen plenty of volunteer and paid-on-call firefighters who are better trained and more disciplined than those in full-time departments — notice, I didn't say "career" departments.

**Dirty turnout gear still is worn proudly, despite the dangers.** Recently, I saw a popular fire instructor toting his blackened helmet and charcoal-colored turnout coat as his badge of honor. Has he not read all the research and the revised NFPA 1851 standard, which state that turnout gear should be cleaned regularly and particularly after exposure to toxins or carcinogens? Turnout gear should be kept out of living and sleeping quarters and stored in a separate area with an exhaust to the outside.

According to the International Association of Fire Fighters' LODD statistics, twice as many firefighters will die by the age of 60 from cancer than from cardiac arrest. Compared to the general public, firefighters are more likely to get (in pri-

ority): testicular cancer, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkins lymphoma, skin cancer, brain cancer and prostate cancer. Think about what you can do differently in your departments. (See [firechief.com/bonus-content/](http://firechief.com/bonus-content/) for suggestions from the Firefighter Cancer Support Network.)

**Firefighters still are behaving badly in the firehouse.** Do you know what follows horseplay? It's clean up, and it's not always easy. Firefighters aren't alone when it comes to horsing around on the job. It happens in companies, organizations and schools. Sometimes people are lucky because no one gets hurt. However, there is the one time when somebody goes overboard and someone else is hurt or offended, then it really hits the fan. Whether it involves scantily clad females posing for photos in the fire station or just teasing the rookies, it's just not worth the possible fall-out that could result from pranks. Social media thrives on fun that went wrong.

**The fire service predominantly still is white and male.** I recently received an e-mail from an officer who wanted to write about his department's first female firefighter. I wanted to respond, "What took you so long?"

A number of departments still don't have women — or African-Americans, Asians or Native Americans — in their ranks. But should a department make the news for finally taking that step? Is taking that hiring step 50 years after affirmative action began really something to be proud of? A firefighter's gender or race shouldn't matter — just his or her ability to do the job.

We have to stop living in the past. Instead, we need to learn from it and move forward. It is 2013 — stop dragging your feet.

*Janet Wilmoth*