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Assessment of Barriers to Wildland Firefighters' Fitness Training

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Title: Assessment of Barriers to Wildland Firefighters' Fitness Training

Introduction: Working on a wildland fire can be physically and mentally taxing. Given the physical demands of the job, fitness is a key component in keeping wildland firefighters (WLFFs) healthy and safe from injury. Unfortunately little is known about physical training (PT) programs of WLFFs.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine motivators and barriers to PT in WLFFs. Personal, interpersonal, organizational and environmental factors that influence PT were identified. Strategies for overcoming barriers were recommended.

Methods: This study utilized a descriptive research design. Information about PT practices was collected through interviews with key informants (i.e. individuals in leadership positions who work directly with crew members). Interview data was analyzed qualitatively. Additionally, a questionnaire was developed, reviewed by experts, pilot tested and distributed electronically to WLFFs. Questionnaire data was entered in the SPSS statistical program. Barriers and motivators to engaging in PT among distinct categories such as agency type and crew type were examined for differences among the categories.

Results: Sixteen interviews were conducted with key informants from multiple state, federal and volunteer agencies. Two over-arching concepts emerged from interviews as major influences on PT. The first concept, firefighter culture, encompassed several themes. Themes included the *powerful influence of leadership* and the *desire to be seen as a strong, capable and dependable crew member*. The second concept, environment, included the influence of factors such as *training facilities and equipment* and the need for *more holistic education about PT and overall health*. Preliminary questionnaire results from nearly 1000 firefighters reveal the most frequently identified barrier to PT to be *projects and work related trainings taking precedence over PT*. Multiple motivating factors were identified including *having a supervisor that participates in PT* and *wanting to be seen as a strong crew member*.

Conclusions: This project was an attempt to gain an understanding of the current physical training practices of wildland firefighters. More importantly, results from this study identify, from the perspective of the firefighters themselves, the major motivators and barriers to engaging in quality, consistent physical training.

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