



# THE VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER LIFESTYLE



# Need to Talk?

Here are some helpful resources

Heroes Are Human 1-888-288-8036

Community Mental Health Services 705-327-9122

Canadian Mental Health Association 705-329-5846

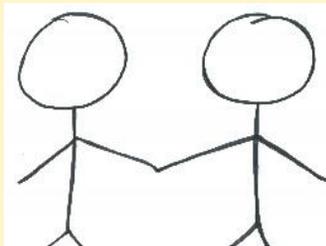
Simcoe Crisis Response Service 705-325-2201

X 353

Or call Ontario's Mental Health Helpline at 1-866-531-2600 for information on services near you.

[www.firstrespondersfirst.ca](http://www.firstrespondersfirst.ca)

[www.tema.ca](http://www.tema.ca)



## Introduction

Congratulations! Your family member has decided to become a volunteer firefighter. You may be feeling excited, nervous or unsure. This guide is intended for spouses, children, parents, siblings, and significant others of volunteer firefighters. Support of the whole family helps to ensure that volunteer firefighters can serve their community safely. There will be challenges and adjustments in your family that will be exciting and rewarding. Thank you for your willingness to share your family member with the community. We hope this guide will help you navigate through the rough spots, and celebrate the sweet moments.

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## Changes to Expect

The decision to become a firefighter is something that will touch your entire family in many ways. Firefighting becomes a lifestyle; erratic schedules, missed family events, and concern for loved one's safety will become a big part of life.

Being a volunteer firefighter means that your loved one is choosing to;

- Serve at a moment's notice
- Put themselves in dangerous situations to help those in need
- Bond with fellow volunteers, and working closely together to keep everyone safe
- Contribute to the community
- Attend weekly and/or monthly meetings and training sessions
- Perform physically demanding work
- Spend extended periods of time outside in inclement weather

## The Pager

Volunteer firefighters carry a pager and receive text alerts that tell them when and where there is an emergency. This alert can go off at any hour of the day, on any day of the week. **Be prepared for interruptions** (during supper, at 3am, when leaving for vacation, during severe weather). The pager knows only one thing; there is someone in need.

Learn to associate the pager with the fact that someone is in need. Have an agreement that whatever was interrupted by the pager will be finished later. The pager should not become an excuse for not finishing important conversations.

An important skill to learn is to be able to stop a conversation when a call comes in and resume that conversation when both of you are able to continue.



## The Gear

Fire gear will be issued to protect your family member while on scene of a fire or accident. The gear is big, sometimes dirty, and may contain harmful contaminants. Never wash bunker gear in the family washing machine and avoid storing it in the home.

Gear should be cleaned after every harmful exposure (this can be done at Ramara's Station 2, or it can be sent out for full cleaning and inspection). It is best to keep clean gear in your vehicle so it can be easily accessed.



## Time Commitment

With a firefighter in the family, your calendar will now contain the following;

- Hall Duty (crews take turns cleaning the hall, doing truck checks, etc.).
- Safety Meetings
- Training every Wednesday night
- New Recruit Training (generally every other weekend for the probationary year).
- Public Education Events (usually these are optional events)

\*See the example calendar attached\*

Firefighters may even stop by the department at times he/she is not required to, just to visit with their fellow firefighters. Eventually your volunteer may take on additional roles with the department, which require even larger time commitments. Try thinking of the victim and his or her family that needs the help instead of thinking about the inconvenience to yourself. This may help you cope with the busy and unpredictable schedule.

## Physical Demands

Fighting fire and responding to emergencies are exhausting activities. Wearing heavy gear and dragging water lines require great physical exertion and mental stamina. Nights interrupted with calls can cause disturbed sleeping patterns. Your volunteer may start taking naps or to going to bed early. Try to respect your loved ones time to recover both physically and mentally. Also bear in mind that you may be adding more time to your schedule for working out or planning healthy meals. Use this opportunity to plan fun family activities.

## Support

It is exciting to know that your family member is able to serve and care for your community. Being around a group of people who understand the call of emergency services is helpful and rewarding. In many cases, being part of fire services has created lifelong friendships. This reigns true for the family members of fire personnel as well. It is comforting to seek friendship with other people who have family in the department. They are most likely going through the same things that you are.

The nature of the work can generate worry and concern, for both the volunteer and your family. It is important to discuss these worries openly.



WHERE  
ARE  
YOU  
?



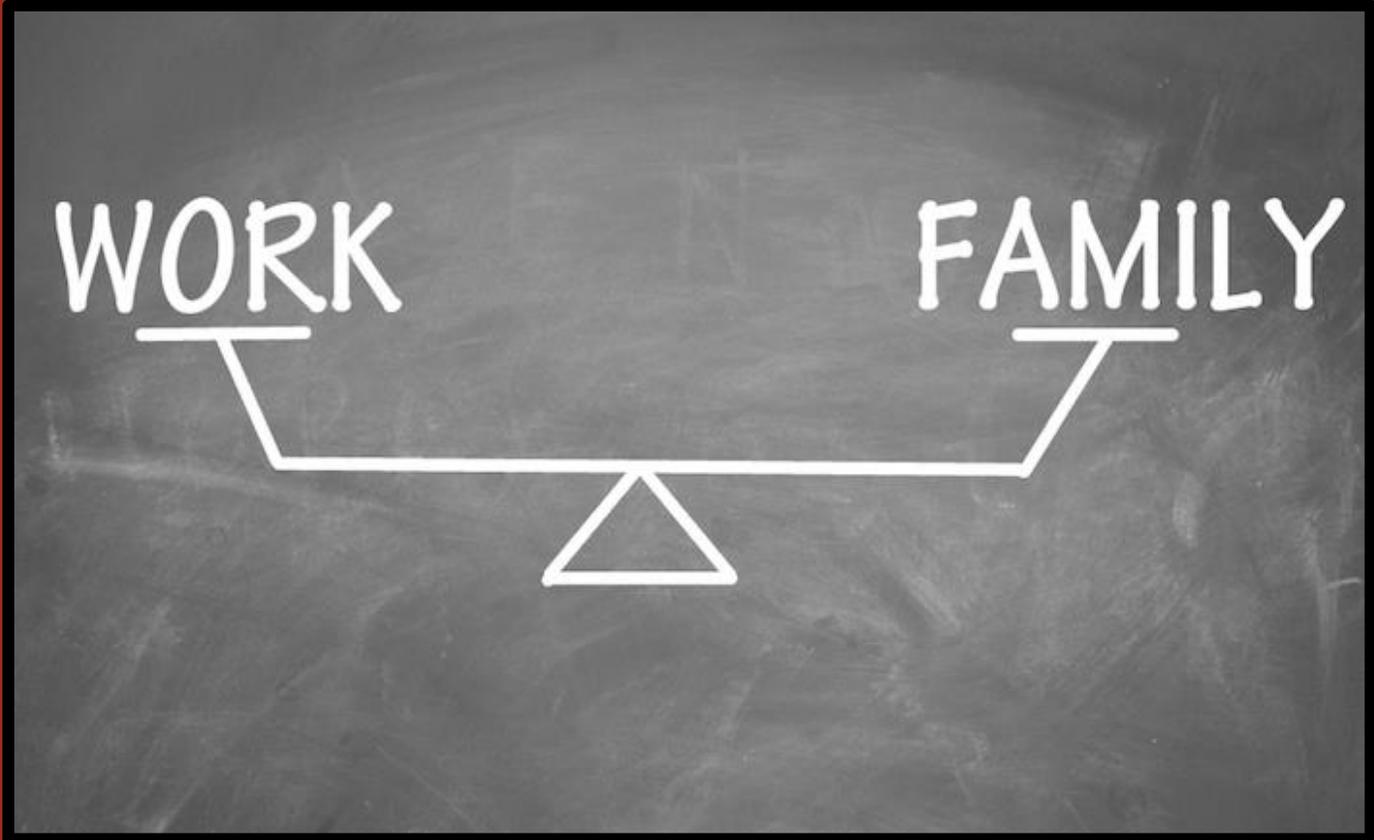
## Communicating While at a Call

When your volunteer firefighter gets a call, they must move quickly. There is really only time for a quick “I love you! Be careful!” exchange before they leave. It is important that you do not take this personally. They are not intentionally or rudely abandoning you.

When your volunteer arrives on an emergency scene, they will not be able to communicate with you. While you may be worried and concerned about them, their first attention must be on their own safety. You must remember that your family is not being forgotten. Firefighters are well trained in dealing with life threatening situations, but must focus solely on the emergency. It is clear that ‘check-in’ phone calls or text messages are a dangerous distraction.

## Not Knowing they’re on a Call

There may be occasions when your volunteer first responder receives a call when they are not with you. Time passes by and the firefighter does not come home, you may think “Where are they? They left for the store 45 minutes ago”. Today with the convenience of text messaging, some families have agreed to send a short text message to let their family know they are going to respond to a call.



### Schedules and Planning

Firefighting and emergency response can become a serious passion. Passions tend to weave into every aspect of one's life. Some families choose to volunteer together and share this passion. Firefighting can quickly take over the calendar while family activities take a back seat. Talk openly about balancing volunteer time with family time to minimize the impact. It will take some time to figure out what works best in adjusting to your new normal.

It may be helpful to schedule family time in to the calendar. There is a chance that a call may come in and interrupt these plans, make sure you reschedule and do not give up.

### Understanding the Importance of Training

It may be harder to accept that your family member is going to training than it is to accept the fact that they are responding to a call. After all, a call is an emergency, and training isn't. Training is the only way a firefighter learns to keep everyone safe (including themselves) on scene. Attending all training should be a top priority when joining the department.



## Managing Your Worries

There are some very simple and easy techniques you can use to manage your anxieties.

- Communicate your concerns early and often
- Trust in the firefighter's training and ability
- Contact a friends/family Rescue Intervention Team (R.I.T.)
- Have discussions after training events about what the firefighter has learned. This may reinforce the fact that they are prepared for these situations.

These skills are important in many areas of life but come in especially handy if you are the family member of a volunteer first responder. Most importantly, be sure you have a friends/family Rescue Intervention Team (R.I.T.) in place. These are people in your life whom you can call on in a time of need.

## Do Volunteers Get Paid?

Communication, trust, and time conflicts can cause challenges in any relationship. Firefighting puts these challenges to the test and throws in one more challenge – finances.

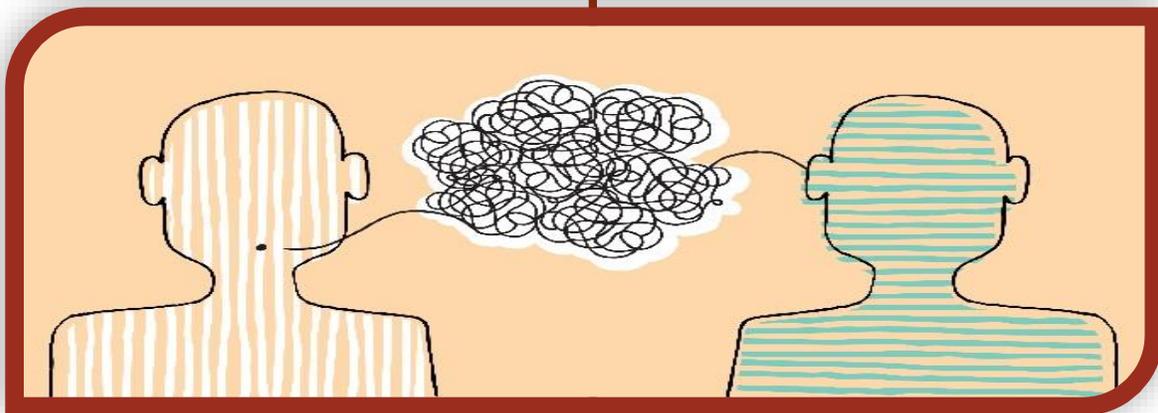
Ramara's volunteer firefighters are paid monthly for their time spent training, doing hall duty, and responding to calls. They are not paid for being on call (our volunteer firefighters are on call 24/7).

In many cases, firefighters choose to spend their own money on top of the line helmets, boots, clothing and accessories such as green lights (these go on the vehicle to indicate that a volunteer firefighter is responding to a call). This could potentially add financial stress. If having fancy gear doesn't interest your firefighter then the pay can be a helpful extra for your family.



## Keeping your Relationship Strong

1. Communication is key. Talk about how the department will affect your relationship. Try and understand how the other feels. Make agreements for how you will handle the situations that volunteer firefighting brings.
2. Be supportive. Nothing drives a wedge in a relationship faster than being unsupportive of one another's interests and hobbies. Do not complain about something that your significant other loves and wants to do.
3. Stay connected. Be sure you are having date nights and time away from the pager. Try not to let fire department topics overtake all of your conversations.
4. Be understanding about the mental and physical stress that volunteer firefighting brings. When a firefighter comes home from a call, they may need downtime to recover physically and mentally. The job doesn't end when the call is over, build in time for renewal for both of you.
5. Be understanding about confidentiality. A firefighter cannot talk about calls with people who are not on the department. This can be frustrating if you hear the call go out over the pager, or if they are gone for a long time. You must accept that you will not know what your firefighter is doing at all times.
6. Know when to seek help and identify when the stress and emotional strain are too much. If you suspect something is wrong, know where to turn for help if these issues become overwhelming (see list of mental health resources, page 2).
7. Work through jealousy issues together. If you're feeling like an outsider to the fire department remember that there are roles for the whole family to support the department. Keep the lines of communication open and try to prevent issues from escalating to the "it's us or the fire department" level. Express the root of the jealousy, rather than simply the fact that there are jealousy issues.

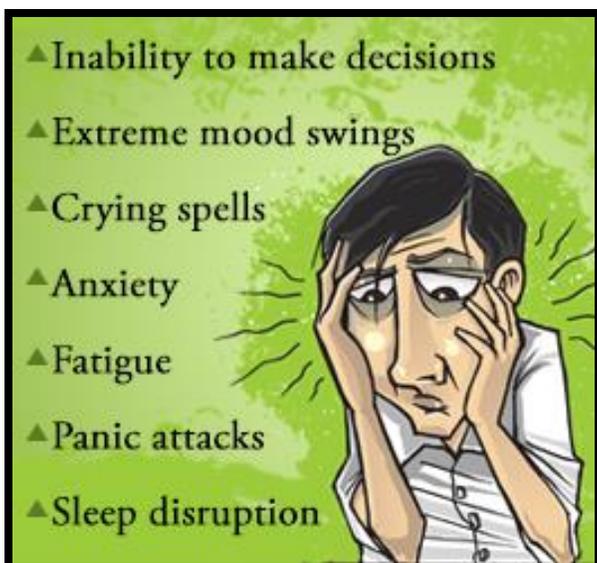


## Volunteers Come in All Shapes, Sizes, Ages, and Genders

There are men and women of all ages who volunteer in a variety of fire department roles. It takes many types of people performing different tasks to get the job done. If your family decides to volunteer together, discuss the following;

- If both parents are volunteer firefighters, will you work on a working fire together?
- Are you ready to handle the extra emotion of having a loved one work in a dangerous setting alongside you?

Having multiple volunteers in one family is common when there is a long history and tradition of firefighting.



## Attending a Call for Family or Friends

One aspect that makes volunteer firefighting even more challenging is that you are serving the community where you live. Chances are your volunteer will eventually respond to a call to help someone they know.

It is never easy when a friend or loved one loses a child, parent, or spouse, but being the first responder on the scene to help this person can be extraordinarily difficult. These situations are very stressful and are complicated by existing relationships. It is important for your first responder to understand this risk and consider how a call will be handled when it involves someone they know. A strong family support system will be a great benefit to your first responder. Firefighters must maintain a great deal of strength and professionalism to help those in need.

Watch for warning signs of exhaustion. As a family member of a volunteer, be prepared for and understand the responses you may see. It is important to know the signs and symptoms so they can be recognized and treated.

## Preparing for the Worst: Line-of-Duty Death or Injury

Line of duty injury or death should not be a primary focus, but it is a topic to be discussed (especially if it is a spouse who is volunteering). Other difficult topics to be addressed include the following;

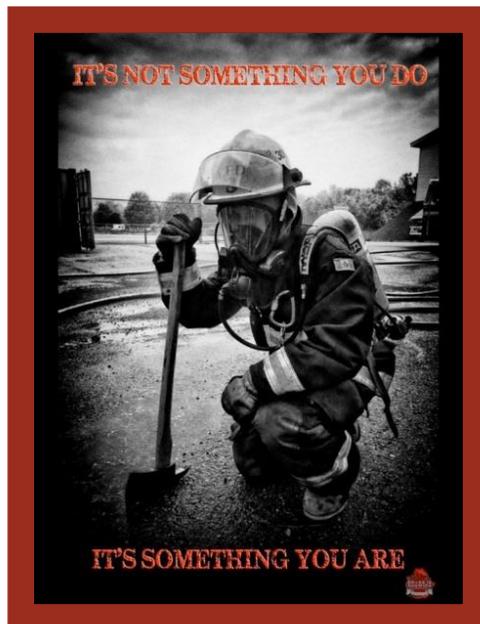
- **Financial planning;** how will you support your family without the extra income? Identify what your insurance does and does not cover and consider insurance options through Ramara Fire and Rescue.
- **Preparing for injuries;** how will your family cope if the volunteer becomes critically injured? Research support groups that are available to help you deal with new circumstances. Injuries may also affect their ability to perform their regular, paying job.
- **Talking with your children;** discuss important words you would want to share with your children in the case your firefighter is killed in the line of duty. Discuss ways you can address your children's fear of their parent being hurt or killed in the line of duty.
- **Planning the funeral;** are there any special wishes the firefighter has for funeral services/burial? Do they want a traditional fire department service with a truck procession and dress uniforms?
- **Having a family spokesperson;** it can be helpful to have a family spokesperson and organizer ready to help coordinate details (especially if the incident was high profile and the media is interested in the story). Identify this person before you need their assistance.

These conversations are difficult to have, but knowing your loved one's wishes in the event of a line-of-duty death provides comfort for the surviving family. Take the time to have these difficult conversations so that you are prepared if the unthinkable occurs. Preparing for a line-of-duty injury is something many families of emergency personnel overlook.



## Understanding the Passion and Commitment of the Fire Service

Firefighting can be a very intense and passionate focus for some people. It certainly seems as if some people were “born to be firefighters,” and for that we can all be grateful to have people who want to do this dangerous work. However, it is very true that balance is important in all relationships. Speaking especially to spouses, keeping open and clear lines of communication is the key, to having a successful relationship with a volunteer first responder. Even if you don’t share the same passion for the fire service, try to understand your firefighter’s commitment to this service and their need for your support. As noted before, being a volunteer firefighter is more than a hobby – it is a way of life; by recognizing this and working together with your firefighter, you can create a new dynamic that works for your family.



## Conclusion

Being part of the Ramara Fire and Rescue Services can be an incredible and rewarding experience. You may not be the one that signed up to be a volunteer firefighter, but having a spouse, sibling, child, or parent join the fire service will still have a significant impact on your life. By embracing this new lifestyle, you can learn to break down barriers, overcome challenges, build relationships, and reap all the great things the fire service has to offer. We hope this guide has offered some insight as to what it means to volunteer with Ramara Fire and Rescue Services.

There are a number of resources available for volunteer first responders and their families to help them navigate the fire service life. We encourage you to tap into these resources to help your volunteer and your family stay safe and strong.

# Potential Training Schedule

<b>March</b>						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Hall Duty This Month: St.1 – Sq. 2 St.2 – Sq. 1 St.3 – Sq. 2		1	2 WHMIS /GHS Triple Station-2	3	4	5 Recruit Training 08:00-15:00 STN 2
6 Ice Water Practical St-2	7	8	9 Wildland Firefighting Fit Testing Station-3	10	11	12
13	14 March Break  	15	16 Officer Training St- 3 Chapter 9 Company Officer 5 <sup>th</sup>	17 Joint Health and Safety Meeting 19:00 St- 2	18	19 Recruit Training 08:00-15:00 STN 2
20	21	22 Recruit Training Review 19:00-21:00 STN 1	23 4 Gas Detector Training Triple Station-3	24	25 <u>Good Friday</u>	26
27	28 <u>Easter Monday</u>	29	30 Alarm for Life	31		

