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The "Fire Family": A Qualitative Exploration of The Volunteer Firefighter Organizational Culture And Social Support System in Rural Communities

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Abstract

The organizational culture and social support system of the fire family provides an opportunity to explore internal strengths within the volunteer fire service to address the unique mental health needs of volunteer firefighters. Nine frontline firefighters from three rural fire departments in Nova Scotia, Canada, participated in a series of three interviews that included photo-elicitation as part of this qualitative study. Twenty fire officers from the participating fire departments also participated in three separate focus groups. One fire officer participated in an individual interview. The study sought to examine features within the volunteer fire service's occupational environment that create either opportunities or barriers to mental wellness. One of the prevalent themes that emerged was the concept of the fire family as an integral aspect of the organizational culture as well as a significant social support system for morale and wellness.

This paper starts with a review of the existing literature on the volunteer fire service organizational culture and social support systems, including peer support. The paper moves to a qualitative exploration and understanding of both the opportunities and barriers of the fire family structure. It concludes with a discussion on the need to increase existing social support capacity and mental health knowledge through the fire family structure within the rural volunteer fire service to better address the mental health needs of this population.

Keywords: Volunteer firefighters, peer support, mental health, social support, organizational culture, rural communities

La « famille des pompiers » : une exploration qualitative de la culture organisationnelle et du système de soutien social des pompiers volontaires en milieu rural

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Résumé

La culture organisationnelle et le système de soutien social de la famille des pompiers volontaires offrent l'occasion d'explorer les forces internes des services d'incendie volontaires afin de répondre à leurs besoins uniques en matière de santé mentale. Neuf pompiers de première ligne de trois services d'incendie ruraux de la Nouvelle-Écosse, au Canada, ont participé à une série de trois entrevues, incluant la photo-élicitation, dans le cadre de cette étude qualitative. Vingt pompiers des services d'incendie participants ont également participé à trois groupes de discussion distincts. Un pompier a participé à une entrevue individuelle. L'étude visait à examiner les caractéristiques de l'environnement professionnel des services d'incendie volontaires qui créent des opportunités ou des obstacles au bien-être mental. L'un des thèmes dominants qui a émergé était le concept de la famille des pompiers comme partie intégrante de la culture organisationnelle et comme système de soutien social important pour le moral et le bien-être.

Cet article commence par un examen de la littérature existante sur la culture organisationnelle et les systèmes de soutien social des services d'incendie volontaires, y compris le soutien par les pairs. L'article passe à une exploration qualitative et à compréhension des opportunités et des obstacles liés à la structure familiale des pompiers. Il conclut par une discussion sur la nécessité d'accroître les capacités de soutien social et les connaissances en santé mentale au sein des services de pompiers volontaires ruraux, grâce à la structure familiale des pompiers, afin de mieux répondre aux besoins de cette population en matière de santé mentale.

Mots-clés : Pompiers volontaires, soutien par les pairs, santé mentale, soutien social, culture organisationnelle, communautés rurales

1.0 Introduction

Volunteer firefighters make up the majority of the volunteer fire service across Canada, where their work is dangerous and an essential element of emergency services in the remote and rural communities they serve (Wagner & O'Neill, 2012). Volunteer firefighters in rural communities face unique challenges not typically experienced by paid or career firefighters (Wagner & O'Neill, 2012). Volunteer firefighters are expected to be on call and wear a pager to respond to emergencies 24/7/365. They typically leave work, school, and/or family functions to respond to emergencies. Volunteer firefighters are also generally expected to fundraise for essential firefighting equipment and have a lack of resources and support for health and wellbeing initiatives (Wagner & O'Neill, 2012). Volunteer firefighters in rural communities engage in this occupation as a form of serious leisure, not employment. Stebbins (1982) defines serious leisure as the pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity in which individuals center on acquiring special skills, knowledge, and experience that they deem substantial and interesting, which can seem career-centered. Volunteer firefighters are trained to the same standards as paid firefighters. Even though these firefighters are volunteers and spend their leisure time engaged in this occupation, they respond to the same types of high-risk emergency incidents as those who are paid or career firefighters and are exposed to a variety of potentially traumatic incidents such as structure fires, motor vehicle accidents, and medical emergencies (Wagner & O'Neill, 2012). It is well documented that responding to these types of emergency incidents puts firefighters at a higher risk for developing mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress injuries (PTSI), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and ideation, as well as moral distress and injury to name a few (Beshai & Carleton, 2016). Volunteer firefighters also face significant barriers to addressing mental health concerns. Most volunteer firefighters are geographically situated in rural or remote communities where access to mental health services, in general, is scarce. Additionally, the affordability of mental health services creates barriers for volunteer firefighters who must fundraise for essential fire equipment, leaving little to no funding within the organization for mental health services. Also, there is the stigma associated with an organizational culture entrenched in masculinity that can impact willingness to seek help (Johnson et al., 2020; Brazil, 2017; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002; O'Neill & Alonso, 2018; Stanley et al., 2017).

Despite these challenges, there are many positive aspects of the volunteer firefighter occupational environment and culture, including camaraderie and social support networks that act as protective factors when it comes to volunteer firefighter mental health outcomes. Since volunteer firefighters spend a large amount of their leisure time engaged in firefighter activities as a team, this creates a special bond commonly referred to as ‘brotherhood’/‘sisterhood’, or ‘fire family’ (Javanbakht, 2021; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002). Firefighter identity and culture are deeply rooted in the ideals of heroic masculinity, and this can appear in different ways. While this is commonly viewed from the more toxic and problematic perspective of hypermasculinity, such as stoicism, competition, and not showing emotions that contribute to the stigma surrounding mental health struggles, another way heroic masculinity ideals can be shown is through a culture of ‘companionate love’ where ideals of caring, compassion, and trust are at the forefront (O'Neill & Alonso, 2018). Historically, volunteer firehouses have provided a space for men from different occupational backgrounds to form a community of respect, brotherhood, solidarity, and shared group identity (Greenberg, 1998). Many volunteer firefighters actively rely on this

social network to mitigate the negative impacts of responding to potentially traumatic events through social support, or even peer support programs if they are available and have been developed in the volunteer fire department (Price et al., 2022). There is a wide range and spectrum of peer support programs, but these generally refer to emotional or social assistance provided by individuals with shared, lived experiences in areas of mental health (Price et al., 2022; Wagner & O'Neill, 2012). Firefighters throughout this study discussed the 'fire family' as an integral aspect of the organizational culture and a critical social support system and internal peer network within the volunteer fire service to address mental health concerns.

The fire service has an overarching culture that has been created and established throughout history through language, rules, images, and themes that emerge in the day-to-day realities of being part of a fire department and responding to emergency calls (Brazil, 2017; Brazil, 2019). This shared ethos and history among the fire service sheds light on the foundational elements of the organizational culture (Brazil, 2017; Corneil et al., 1999; Greenberg, 1998). Brazil (2019) highlights that informal learning is a large contributor to group identity and joint values within the fire department as a shared community of practice. Through working together and sharing work activities, the culture of the community is integrated into the ways of operating. Within the realm of volunteer firefighting, dedication, commitment, and sacrifice are required to achieve a social ideal of what it means to be a firefighter, as well as a sense of identity and accomplishment; all factors that contribute to being a volunteer firefighter (Yarnal & Dowler, 2002; Brazil, 2017). Simpson (1996) adds another layer to the understanding of the culture through the male-dominated aspects of the volunteer fire service and speaks to the firehouse fraternity or more commonly referred to as the firehouse brotherhood. According to Simpson (1996), this fraternity grows during non-competitive interactions at the firehall, such as maintaining equipment. The firehouse space itself lends to the idea of a fraternity (Simpson, 1996). Other studies refer to this sense of camaraderie and friendship as the brotherhood/sisterhood, or second family within the fire service (Yarnal & Dowler, 2002; Jones, 2016; Whitney, 2012). Yarnal et al. (2004) argue that the brotherhood is cemented in a sharing ritual of masculine identity. The brotherhood is considered universal to firefighters, not just to those in rural locations with strong community connections (Jones, 2016). Yarnal and Dowler (2002) found the brotherhood is more than just friendship, it is group behaviour that builds trust and confidence among the fire team which is vital when responding to emergency situations and allows colleagues to lean on each other in difficult times (Alder-Tapia, 2013; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002; Kronenberg et al., 2008; Corneil et al., 1999). In recent years the idea of the brotherhood has been expanded to include the sisterhood or just referred to as the fire family with the introduction of female firefighters and other identifying genders within the fire service. However, the culture is still entrenched in masculine ideals and values. The culture of the brotherhood/sisterhood makes formalized peer support a natural approach to mental wellness that can be implemented in fire departments as many firefighters are already supporting one another in informal ways (Alder-Tapia, 2013; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002; Kronenberg et al., 2008; Price et al., 2022).

1.1 Peer Support

There are two types of peer support, informal and formal. Informal peer support has been defined as, "less structured support provided by participants who are drawn together by what they have in common, with none more experienced or better

prepared to offer support than the other" (Sunderland et al., 2013, p. 45). These types of interactions are often related to a variety of stressors and not necessarily just about mental health. Formal peer support is defined as, "support that is offered by trained and/or experienced peer support workers within a structured setting" (Sunderland et al., 2013, p. 45). Peer support programs are designed to provide emotional support between two people through their shared experiences (Beshai & Carleton, 2016; Carleton et al., 2020; Price et al., 2022). By engaging peers rather than mental health professionals, there is evidence to show that peer support helps increase rapport, normalize experiences, reduce stigma, and reduce barriers to seeking treatment (Carleton et al., 2018a; Beshai & Carleton, 2016; Hundt et al., 2015; Corneil et al., 1999). There is also evidence that social connectedness through peer support is vital for suicide prevention (Stanley et al., 2018). The shared experiences and understandings of the unique situations in which volunteer firefighters respond foster empathy and trust among community members (Kemp & Henderson, 2012; Brazil, 2017; Carleton et al., 2018b).

Formalized peer support is different from friends who may provide informal support. Peer supporters are generally trained and supervised in providing this type of emotional and social support (Carleton et al., 2018a; Beshai & Carleton, 2016; Grenier et al., 2007). There are a growing number of programs to train firefighters and other first responders to be peer supporters and provide emotional support to their peers (Price et al., 2022; Carleton et al., 2018b). Price et al. (2022) developed a framework and typology for understanding the various models within the formalized peer support structure. There has been a significant push to advance formalized peer support programs and to focus solely on formal peer support to address mental health concerns, with the goal of reducing stigma and building resilience (Price et al., 2022). However, due to issues of affordability and capacity, formal peer support programs are not necessarily a viable option for rural volunteer fire departments. With peer support training only available to selected individuals in formalized peer support structures, this leaves a gap in knowledge and training for individuals who find themselves in a more informal or organic peer support role or who might be providing emotional support to peers who have not been selected for specific peer support roles (if such formalized structure even exists within that volunteer fire department). A study by Dangermond et al. (2022) provided evidence to support informal peer support among firefighters to cope with critical incidents and that many firefighters preferred this over formal sessions. Informal peer support helped firefighters process critical incident exposure and promoted unit cohesion.

This paper explores both barriers and opportunities within the fire family organizational culture and concludes with a discussion on how to leverage this social and peer support system to better address the mental health needs of the volunteer firefighter population in rural communities.

2.0 Methods

The qualitative data presented in this paper was collected as part of the *Sound the Siren* research study, which explored the relationship between the occupational environment of volunteer fire service in rural Nova Scotia and the mental health and well-being of volunteer firefighters. A social constructionist paradigm was used with a methodological framework that merged two qualitative methodologies, narrative inquiry and case studies, called narrative case studies. The study also employed

photo-eliciation methods. Together this epistemology and methodological framework explored how the occupational environment impacts the mental health and well-being of volunteer firefighters in rural Nova Scotia within a historical, social, and cultural context.

Thirty volunteer firefighters (24 men and six women) from three rural fire departments in Nova Scotia participated in this social constructionist study. Using purposive and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2013), data collection included a series of three interviews that included photo-elicitation, with each of nine frontline firefighters and three focus groups with a total of twenty officers. Focus groups with senior officers explored leadership decision-making around mental health services and support within the occupational environment. One officer participated in an interview due to not being available for the focus group.

Photo-elicitation was used during the second interview with frontline firefighters to further explore aspects within the occupational environment that impact mental health and well-being. An important characteristic of photo-elicitation is that while the photograph might stimulate memories, the information conveyed might not be within the image (Padgett et al., 2013; Harper, 2002). The image acts as a prompt and evokes feelings, memories, and thoughts that go beyond the contents of the photograph (Harper, 2002).

The photo-elicitation method provided a collaborative and participatory approach to data collection and interpretation. Frontline firefighters were asked to take or find photographs to share with the researcher during the second interview with the prompts for the photographs to answer the following questions: “What are the most important aspects of the work you do as a volunteer firefighter?” “What would you want people to understand about being a volunteer firefighter?” And “What aspects of volunteer firefighting have an impact on your mental health?” During the second interview, the firefighters shared the story behind each photograph presented to the researcher, which allowed for more in-depth dialogue on various topics of importance to the firefighters. All firefighters selected existing images (they did not take new photographs for this study). This interview was research participant-driven based on the narrative of the images. Joint theorizing and member checking were used during this interview. After the research participants had finished sharing their photographs, the researcher asked them about any themes or patterns they noticed. All themes and patterns noticed by firefighters were documented. The joint theorizing process allowed for further discussion of stories or experiences that might not have been directly related to what was seen in the photograph and provided a deeper understanding of the content being shared. Additionally, this process helped develop any clarifying questions or areas to explore further with participants during the final interview.

The lead author was positioned as an insider researcher, having been a former volunteer firefighter in rural Nova Scotia. This position helped to ease interactions and access to working with the volunteer fire service. The role of reflexivity was critical and required throughout this study for the researcher to ensure their bias, perspectives, and interpretations did not become more prominent than those of the research participants (Guillemin & Drew, 2010; Dam, 2022; Harper, 2002; Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Reflexivity was used at each stage of the research process by using a reflective journal for critical reflection and deliberating with the research team (Creswell, 2013). The photo-elicitation process and joint-theorizing opportunity with participants assisted with reflexivity as well.

The study sought to answer the following two questions: (1) How do rural volunteer firefighters understand and make sense of their occupational environment? (2) How does the occupational environment create both opportunities and barriers for volunteer firefighters in rural Nova Scotia to attend to their mental health and well-being?

Research ethics approval was received from the Health Sciences Research Ethics Board at Dalhousie University. COVID-19 lockdown and public health measures occurred in the middle of data collection for this study. Data collection began in February 2020 but was halted until July 2020, when in-person data collection could resume. All in-person data collection was done in accordance with Nova Scotia public health guidelines. All information was recorded and transcribed with the research participants' consent.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic mapping, joint theorizing with participants, and thematic analysis with discourse analysis. NVivo was used for data analysis. Thematic mapping was used initially to provide a guide for analysis across the focus group and interview transcripts, and the joint-theorizing process focused on the cultural and social meanings within the data and provided a conceptualization of the related themes as a way for the researcher to generate initial codes and themes. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were followed (familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report). Joint theorizing with participants was used during the second interview with photo-elicitation, a key component of the data analysis, and member checking by discussing emerging themes with research participants. Finally, discourse analysis was used to highlight cultural and social factors identified through the language used by research participants (Czarniawska, 1997; Souto-Manning, 2014).

3.0 Findings

The three emerging narrative themes were the "Fire Family Culture and Support System," "Leadership", "and Dysfunction within the Fire Family Support System." The theme of the Fire Family Culture and Support System describes the positive aspects of the culture of the fire service as a family that also serves as a critical support system with themes and layers described as togetherness, social support, special bond, trust, commitment, and dependency. The theme of Leadership describes the role of senior officers as parental figures who are responsible for the overall well-being of the firefighters. The responsibilities and decision-making processes by leadership for managing the mental health and well-being of firefighters emerged as significant layers within this theme. The final theme, Dysfunction within the Fire Family Support System, highlights the challenges and more negative aspects of the fire family culture. The layers that emerged within this theme include internal conflict, competition, favoritism, boredom, and betrayal.

3.1 The Fire Family Culture and Support System

The fire family was described as a cohesive structure by all firefighters in this study, developed because of the deep relationships built through shared experiences of responding to emergency incidents and the dangerous realities of that work. As Firefighter G explains,

> We've had… group togetherness as a family. Even though we're not blood, it's a family. So we get to do other stuff that's not all the gruesome and take that side of the fire service with you…When it comes to the fire service, it can't just be all the gruesome. It has to be more than that to make you want to be here and do this. So it doesn't have to be just the actual fire instances, [it's] that you having an extended family behind you that will do the same thing you do for a perfect stranger, you do for your fellow firefighters. You go that extra mile when they need it and not think about it…It's quite an awesome feeling, really, when you think about it that way and…it's quite an organization we're in. And like I said, it's commonly referred to as your fire family. It's not a group. It's not a club. You're part of a family. So when somebody has issues with mentally [*sic*], we try to do the exact same thing and help how we can. To help them with the mental side of things. And, you know, we have to lean on each other.

There are multiple layers of the fire family explained in this quote. First is group togetherness. A key element of volunteer firefighting is the social network and social environment. As a social environment, volunteer firefighters spend time together inside and outside of the fire department to help each other and provide social support as needed (Haski-Leventhal & McLeigh, 2009; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002). Getting together for morning coffee or having barbeques together is a common social activity for firefighters. Since volunteer firefighters engage in this occupation as a serious leisure endeavor, it is not surprising that the social aspect with fellow firefighters is an important aspect of the occupation. This social element builds and strengthens group camaraderie and togetherness.

The second layer is the need to have something beyond the gruesomeness and potentially traumatic nature of their work to keep firefighters connected. Volunteer firefighters respond to some of the most traumatic and hazardous emergency incidents that exist, and it was well noted in this study that firefighting is much more than just responding to those incidents. Firefighter C describes,

> It's a second family that you get and there's just something about it. Like you just can't find that connection with anybody. I mean, you're risking your life with the person that's standing next to you as you run into the burning building or you get off the highway … and you're walking in the road and you know that cars are whipping past you, like you put yourself in danger with these people. And there's just this connection that you have with them that you're always gonna have with them...And I think that's just because when you do something as inherently dangerous as we do, you just learn to value people in your life a little bit more.

The danger that firefighters face together creates a special bond and connection that does not normally occur in most organizational settings. This relates to the final layer described in the previous quote, the need to lean on one another, look out for each other, and most importantly, trust one another. Firefighter B states, "*Inside the department is, you know, it's a fellowship or brotherhood or sisterhood…And you have to trust the people in here, if you don't, then somebody's life could be on the line."* Volunteer firefighters are potentially risking their lives every day when responding to emergency incidents and to be able to do that with confidence, firefighters must be able to trust their fellow firefighters with their life and know they can lean on them both on and off the fire ground. Trust was a common theme threaded throughout the study when discussing the strengths of the fire family and how this organizational culture creates stability for volunteer firefighters within an occupational setting that can be potentially traumatic and even chaotic at times.

Within the fire family culture and support system, firefighters spoke to the comfort of feeling like there is always someone to support them and help whenever it is needed. Firefighter C shared,

> I think of everybody there as a friend or even closer than that as a brother or sister…It's almost like everyone has each other's back, like it's an unwritten rule. You walk through that door, and you know that you have forty-five people looking out for you…there's just an instant friendship. Like you totally feel like you joined a family…we've always been close, tight-knit, got each other's back…willing to help you out if you're struggling with something like whether it's fire department related or personal life…there's no shortage of people willing to help you.

The unwritten rule is a commitment to something bigger than oneself and a commitment to the fire family. There is a strong level of dedication, confidence, trust, and even dependency on the fire family that presents as a form of peer support and social support within itself. Firefighters described how the fire family was available and supported them in whatever way they needed. Firefighter A described,

> If there's times that I get down or frustrated about something in my life, I have somebody I can talk to all the time. And regardless of what, what it might be…You know, there are times that we're gonna have to call in, you know somebody more professional than each other. But for us, there's enough of us here that we can seek any kind of comfort we need in one another to handle the vast majority of the situations.

This internal strength of support through the fire family structure was described as the preferred method to handle most difficult situations which exemplifies the desire to manage needs internally. However, the downside of this was described by Firefighter D, "It's just balancing because I know I can't dedicate the time if that person needs someone to lean on a lot. I don't have the time, and you feel guilty about that. I have a tendency to put other people over myself" However, leaning on

the internal support of the fire family can place an undue burden on volunteer firefighters who are not able for many reasons to support a fellow firefighter. If a firefighter requires a lot of support, fellow firefighters may not have the capacity to support them. This is when more formalized peer support programs or external services are needed.

An officer from Focus Group A stated:

> I had a conversation yesterday…all of the issues that some of our firefighters' face don't go to the top. They can be intercepted in the middle. And we try to find someone who can relate to that person better to talk to them because sometimes there's the personality thing or the way people deal with each other. So sometimes even without going to the top level, we talk about how we can help these people before it gets to that point.

For officers, there is a desire to manage issues on the lower level without things needing to come to the top level. This informal process connects firefighters with those they are most comfortable with. The three participating fire departments in this study do not have formalized peer support programs, so their management of issues is structured in this informal way. Within the fire family structure, officers are at a different level for support. Frontline firefighters might not want to reach out to higher levels of leadership for help. Firefighter I mentioned, "That's the downside…The higher up you go in leadership, the less sometimes some of them will talk to you about a problem. I think for the most part they just don't want to bother you. Most of them realize, you know, the higher you go that you're busy, but you're never too busy."

This firefighter, who was previously a fire officer, provides the perspective that leadership is never too busy to listen to the needs of a firefighter but there is a different type of support that is given by fire officers to frontline firefighters due to their levels of responsibility and authority within the organization and the fire family.

3.2 Leadership

Officers feel the responsibility to take care of and support all the firefighters and are continually responding to the needs of firefighters in ways they believe will make a difference. As parental figures within the organizational culture, one of the strategies used to manage firefighter wellness is to protect and shield firefighters from the harms of the job, particularly on the fire ground. This approach can be seen as similar to that of a parent shielding a child from something bad. As a learned behaviour in the fire service, passed down through generations, this approach is highly promoted and accepted as an internal strength of the fire family among fire officers. The officers protect and shield the firefighters, particularly new firefighters. All officers saw this as a strength and were proud of this. An officer from Focus Group B explains,

> We had a fatal accident, and the officers looked at who their crew were, and they realized that if they had placed that crew down in the ditch to do the

> recovery, they could have significantly impacted the mental health of those individuals. So, they quickly searched around as to who else was there, who would have had, not that it's a pleasant experience, but who would have had experience in moving the body and seeing those sites. And they chose who was going to do that. It's an unpleasant task, but they truly put their members' mental health first.

The officers make those decisions about the firefighter's well-being in those moments. However, in that process, the officers are putting themselves or other senior firefighters in the line of fire or trauma, so to speak. They take on the emotional labour and burden as more experienced firefighters to protect the fire family. There is this idea that officers or more senior firefighters are better able to manage their emotional responses due to previous experiences. However, those who adopt this strategy may do so without a full understanding of how cumulative traumatic experiences can be a detriment to their own mental well-being.

An officer from Focus Group A shared,

> Well, actually, our last fatal…I took it upon myself. We had to do an extrication at the end, myself [and a couple officers], we didn't pull any of our crew off because they weren't involved with it at all…But we took our senior people and we went, did the cut, and we left our...when you don't have to put your younger members in that situation. Why do you?...I guess I'm just saying, if you come across an accident, we have a fatality and you've got a new person on the truck and other people to do the job. Why would you take someone who's 18 years old and expose them to that when they don't have to?

This officer shares the perspective of putting the younger or newer firefighter in that situation; if you do not have to, why would an officer do so? It's an interesting perspective shared across the fire departments participating in this study because it begs the question, when is a firefighter old enough or experienced enough to do the more intensive emotional work and labour of firefighting? In Western society, we know that once a child hits age four, they can start school, or when they turn sixteen, they are allowed to learn to drive a car. In this situation, the parents are willing to take the older children to help with the fire scene, but when are the younger children ready? At what age or years of experience is a firefighter ready to handle the emotional aspects of seeing a dead body or removing the body from an emergency incident? Furthermore, who decides this? The concern is that officers are not sure how younger or newer firefighters are going to react, so they shield them away from these scenes. At what age or years of service do the officers start to trust the firefighters to do this work? When do you know they are ready? How do you prepare them? Given the nature of the volunteer fire service and the members that are available to respond to an emergency incident, shielding may not be possible or attainable. What potential harmful outcomes could occur from being shielded for so long when they are eventually exposed to a fatality, or the fire officers have no choice but to expose them due to firefighter availability?

This approach by officers to protect the younger and newer members of the fire family is also relative to the nature of serving in a small, rural community where there are limited mental health resources and services available. The fire family depends on their internal capacity and strength to manage mental health concerns and make decisions about mental health and well-being without necessarily having formal training or education in this area. The officers believe they are helping their family.

Within the literature, there is substantive evidence showing the impact of repeated and cumulative exposure to traumatic incidents among this population, but how can this be changed when it is seen with such pride by officers to protect the younger and newer firefighters? One officer from Focus Group A started to see the problematic nature of this strategy as they discussed it as a group and stated,

> It is a good opportunity for us to bring people up through more severe accidents. Shouldn't just leave it to...a couple of the guys. You should be slowly exposing your younger people who, as [officer] said, have the mental toughness, and hopefully, at that point, you know them well enough, so eventually, it's not going to be fresh when they see people die.

This officer acknowledges that the strategy of having the same firefighters continually doing this type of emotional labour and traumatic work is creating more strain on the officers and senior firefighters while also not allowing younger people to be exposed slowly to more severe incidents. They also allude to the issues of trust with newer or younger firefighters. By not knowing them as well as other members of the fire family, they have not necessarily built that trust with newer firefighters. Once again, trust is vital to how mental health concerns are managed within the fire family.

Firefighter G shared an experience,

> We were asked to cut the roof off [the car] and that was our job. I took the guys off to the side and said this is what we're going to do. Who's good for it? If you're not, let me know. There's no shame. But you're going to be right beside the [dead] fellow. Are you OK? And they were all, yeah, no, we're good. We're good. Are you sure? We're good. They did their job and I said, we're going to go in, do the job, [and] back out. We're not lingering around. I got enough people in there with the medics and everything, I said we're just gonna take the roof off. Simple as that. So that's what we did…I was trying to look out…I put myself between him and them so they couldn't see [the dead person]. And that's the thing that is quite, sometimes it's hard to do. I never knew, even after we get the guy out of the car, I never looked at his face. Didn't need to. I knew it wasn't good. But why am I putting myself in that position?

Other times, depending on the crew, the officer or senior firefighter might give the fire crew a choice of how they want to participate in the severe incident. However, this is likely when some of the level of trust has been established. Even with that

small level of choice, the senior firefighter is still taking on the emotional burden and labor of the potentially traumatic incident. When Firefighter G shared their experience standing between the firefighters and the deceased individual, they even questioned why they were putting themselves in that situation and taking on that emotional burden. Perhaps a strategy is to bring people up through severe incidents and allow them to do more once they have had more training and experience. However, once again that leaves the question of when officers will know that a firefighter is ready? Overall, fire officers and firefighters need more mental health training and resources for managing exposure to trauma.

3.3 *Dysfunction Within the Fire Family Support System*

The fire family culture and support system are described as one big happy family, until it isn't. While much of the focus by participants was on the positive aspect of the fire family, it can also be dysfunctional and cause distress to its members in a variety of ways. Dysfunction occurs when there is internal conflict or misbehaviour. Firefighter G explains, "We're a family, we're an odd fellow family, but family nonetheless…We fight together…it's just what we do.

Members of the fire family fight and can be at odds with one another at times. There are many reasons why fighting within the fire family might occur. Firefighter D explains one reason,

> It's a private organization but it's definitely a family culture. So you will certainly come across those family dynamics where there's he said, she said of course…you see competition. A lot of competition…those dynamics. Just the typical fire-related stuff.

Competition, one of the more potentially toxic heroic masculinity ideals, can lead to conflict and fighting. When firefighters are competing with one another for attention within the fire family, competing to move up the ranks, or competing to hold a certain role or position within the fire department, this can cause in-fighting. There is also a level of favoritism that was explored heavily in this study, where certain individuals within a fire department who might be well-liked or more popular is given more opportunity by the fire officers and members of the fire family, and those left behind feel a level of jealousy. Another firefighter explained that the dysfunctional family situation arises when the firefighters are bored from a lack of fire calls. Firefighter I explains,

> Fires are simple, it's the babysitting when things slow down, I don't know how fire departments survive only with 20 calls a year. You know, they have time to think and bitch...He's got a newer hat than I got…That's when they have time to dwell on the little things…if you're busy, you haven't got time to worry about the little things.

As volunteer firefighters in rural communities, there may be weeks or potentially even months that go by without an emergency call. Firefighters still maintain training and administration work, but the main reason for being there is not being tended to. As Firefighter I describes, they dwell on some of the smaller intricacies

of the fire organization and focus on things that are wrong, which impacts morale. Firefighter B stated,

> You have to survive, it's give and take in every relationship. So here, your ideas may not get passed at a meeting…so we got shot down, but that doesn't mean that you're out of the family; it just means that everybody else didn't think it was a good idea…and you get that at home, too. I mean, you're talking to your spouse about something, and it may turn out that it's not a good idea or it's not affordable at the time or whatever, it's not justifiable or something right. But I think it's just, in comparison, I mean, you got your spouse's back, she has yours, or he has yours or whatever. And in here, you have your partners. You know, if you're going into an interior [fire] attack situation with a partner, you better hope that you're both on the same page and you're both going to protect each other so you both come out...leave as one, return as one.

Firefighter B explains an aspect of the fire service that might lead to fighting when a firefighter is not being heard by the fire family or having their ideas shot down in meetings. However, the firefighter shed light on the fact that the fire family still needs to have each other's back, trust, and protect one another, even if they are not getting along. However, what happens if the fire family doesn't have your back, or a firefighter feels left out? Having a dedicated social support network and social environment is one of the motivations for continued service as a volunteer firefighter. However, when issues arise in the fire service, some firefighters will question why they are there. Firefighter G explains, "You can get some bad feelings, bad taste in your mouth of things and why you want to be here and why you don't want to be here." What happens is that volunteer firefighters stop showing up for periods of time or if it is bad enough, will leave the fire service altogether. Firefighter D mentioned,

> Internal politics…it can be very challenging, very stressful…some of that stress can come from the leadership. Because of communication or lack of communication. I discovered...you can be on the inside or the outside. And that's always kind of frustrated me from a retention part because still as a new person with fresh eyes, you see that. And kind of hear it once in a while from some of the members. But there's that underlying dedication and drive. You know, that's still there, that keeps them here.

When firefighters are stressed and decide to take a step back, the reason firefighters stop showing up rather than quit may be due to the underlying dedication to the fire family, the fire service, and their community. The shared ethos and esprit de corps of the volunteer fire service through group identity is most likely a contributing factor to the dedication to the fire family (Haski-Leventhal & McLeigh, 2009). This also

coincides with the concept of moral obligation and commitment many firefighters have to the fire service (Yarnal & Dowler, 2002). The deep connection to the fire family support system and social environment was mentioned a few times as reasons to stay in the volunteer fire service showing the importance of this structure.

Firefighter D also mentioned that firefighters can be on the inside or on the outside. When a firefighter is on the "inside" they belong and are an ingrained part of the fire family. However, when they are on the "outside" of the family, this has the potential to cause distress. As a key part of the social environment and network for firefighters, the fire department provides an outlet and getaway amongst the fire family. However, the strengths and victories of this fire family also lead to the downfall of the organization. The concepts of trust, dedication, and a sense of belonging and connection to the fire family is an important internal support structure that, while mostly positive, can also pose potentially significant harm to the mental health of volunteer firefighters who do not feel supported or protected by the fire family.

Firefighter J mentioned, "We don't hide anything from each other, so we always talk about stuff…which I think is great for this place because if we didn't work that way, I don't know how the place would ever work." With the knowledge of the critical role of social support that exists through the fire family, the opposite occurs when a firefighter is not getting along with their fire family, does not feel supported, or does not feel like they have anyone to talk to from within. The need to always talk about things and have that safe space is critical to the functionality of the fire department. However, firefighters discussed issues of bullying, belittling, harassment, microaggressions, feeling left out of the fire family, or even shunned because of something that happened. An officer from Focus Group A shared,

> If they feel shunned because of whatever purpose...They're going to and that call does come on. That it's a traumatic call like a bad crash or something like that. They're going to feel that they don't have that capacity to go to anybody or to the right [person]...because they may not know that they can go to [a certain officer] or the chief or a captain. They don't know that process. So then they'll bottle up.

This shunning generates a sense of betrayal. The betrayal is the family leaving you behind and shunning you. A support system that is normally depended upon to help when a firefighter is struggling. Now the firefighter is bottling up their experiences from the fire department and the fire family, a place that is normally an escape from other aspects of their life. Furthermore, when mental health concerns arise, the person does not feel like they can turn to their fire family.

Firefighter D shared,

> We have one member that there's this assumption of drug use, [they] have a lot of personal problems…but no proof…I stand back and say well yes, this particular person has a lot of issues and problems, but when he comes here, he does his job…I haven't seen any problem…[and] he can be shunned…Is there the support that he needs and that should come from leadership…But

> at the same time you know as a family we should be there checking in and…I'm not…I haven't been the best person for that either, so I've been busy with my own life and what's going on. I don't have a very close relationship with this particular person. But yeah, maybe I should be checking in....Maybe it should be my responsibility as a team member, as this part of the family. And then…sometimes I don't want to be caught up in somebody else's drama or issues as well when I have my own.

The firefighter from their department is being shunned by the fire family due to their issues with potential drug use. The fire family does not have the internal tools and mechanisms to manage this, so they turn to shunning the firefighter rather than working with them. As the firefighter describes from their own personal experience, they feel like maybe they should be checking in, but at the same time, they do not want to be caught up in the drama, and they have their own issues. The repercussions are that the firefighter has lost their support network and may stop showing up. An officer from Focus Group A shared:

> You know we do have to do our due diligence with people because people do have off days and things like that…But a lot of these people that we do weed out, you know, if we've ever done an exit interview and is it you know, do they feel is it because of the way we treat them? Is it because of our culture? What is it? What caused you to not show up?

This comment by the officer is insightful because the fire family knows they have taken measures to "weed out" someone but are questioning the reason the individual left the volunteer fire service, was it the culture, or was it the way they treated them? They wonder what caused the volunteer firefighter to stop showing up when in fact the officer already alluded to why- the fire family took measures to "weed them out" for whatever reason. A different officer from Focus Group A shared,

> There are some people that will tolerate it because this is literally, as sad as this may seem, this is all [they] got. So when we shut this station down for COVID restrictions, you could really, really tell who, like this is all people had. They didn't have friends. They didn't have a network of buddies or…Their anxiety went up, you know…Their temperament was changed. They didn't have that same level of calm because they use this as a safe space…if they're coming here and getting bullied…but if they feel like they're being belittled...

Even if firefighters are facing issues of bullying or belittling from their fire family, they might stay because the fire service is such an integral and essential part of their lives for social support. As the officer mentioned, this issue was magnified during COVID-19 lockdowns when access to the social network and environment was lost.

COVID-19 was a collective trauma experienced around the world, but the impact of this collective trauma was experienced differently in subgroups, with volunteer firefighters having a unique experience related to this collective trauma. Erickson (1994, as cited in Bloom, 2010) describes collective trauma as,

> A blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality…it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared…'we' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body."

This study was conducted in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of the pandemic on the fire family was substantial and provided insight into how much volunteer firefighters depend on this structure. One of the officers mentioned how shutting down the fire department due to COVID-19 restrictions really showed the reliance on the fire department and social network within. During this time, volunteer firefighters were still responding to emergencies, but the social aspect of the fire department was shut down. Firefighters went for emergencies and immediately had to leave once it was over. No lingering or hanging out. As the officer described, anxiety went up, and the level of calm subsided because firefighters no longer had access to their safe space. The separation from the fire family was a major shock. Firefighter A described,

> It was hell…Because you couldn't be around the people…we would text and we would Facetime like sometimes. So that was…the best you could hope for. And then we had record turnouts when there was fire calls…when the pager goes off, you're allowed to go. You get the green light to go out and it's okay to be out…and people were…they were just craving that and missing everybody so much because this is a family. People consider this another family. And it was like the family was broken.

There was a feeling that the family was 'broken' and that was a blow to the bonds that attached people together. Firefighter C further expressed,

> You don't realize how much you need to be at the station with your fellow firefighters until you're not there. And it was not so much a want. It was like a need. Like these people know what we go through. They know…the crappiness of the call…Just there's so much of your life that when they're not there, I felt a huge hole…I just feel like a whole part of my life is missing right now because I'm not at that station. I'm not hanging out with them…I felt totally disconnected from them and it was terrible...Like, these guys are like my life…And that's how I mean, I have friends outside of the fire service, but the majority of my friends are in [this fire department].

Perhaps, unlike ever before, this collective experience and collective trauma brought to the forefront the need and reliance on the fire family. There is a peer element to the fire family that only exists among those with the same occupational experiences that someone outside of the occupation would not understand. The internal strength of the fire family support network creates a critical opportunity within the volunteer fire occupational environment to address mental health needs, but it has its hazardous side. If more volunteer firefighters were trained to provide emotional support to one another, and fire officers were given more tools to manage the mental health of members, perhaps when dysfunction occurs, they might be more capable and ready to handle distress, and perhaps there could be room to improve support or avoid issues such as bullying and shunning.

4.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Every firefighter in this study mentioned the organizational culture and social support system of what they called the "fire family." They are referring to a familial culture and support system within the organizational environment. Chiaramonte (2003) speaks to the concept of the brotherhood/sisterhood within the fire service as the steadying force needed to depend on one another while in life-or-death situations, creating a natural familial bond without bloodlines. The concept of the fire family was evident throughout this study from both frontline firefighters and fire officers. In many ways, this fire family structure can be observed in a simplistic view where the fire officers are the "parents" and the frontline firefighters are the "children." The firefighters interact with each other like "brothers and sisters." The terminology of acting like brothers and sisters was language frequently used by participating firefighters. The officer/firefighter relationship equivalency to a parent/child relationship is an interpretation by the researcher but backed up by Firefighter B speaking about one of the photos they chose to share, "That's a group picture. It's like a family picture right because we're all family here, brothers and sisters… That's the family right there. Ma and pa and all the kids." The narratives expressed about the fire family speak to a unique aspect of the organizational culture and internal support system that creates both opportunities and barriers to dealing with and managing difficult issues such as mental health.

While the fire family is both a culture and support system within the volunteer fire service, it predominated as an important internal occupational structure throughout this study. Collective trauma experienced during COVID-19 magnified the reliance on the fire family structure for many volunteer firefighters. This knowledge and understanding of the significance of this structure are critical to better address the mental health needs of volunteer firefighters, particularly those in rural communities where internal resources through the fire department might be the only way, or certainly is the preferred way, to access mental health support and services. While this study showed that the fire family structure has many positive aspects, it also presented negative aspects and potentially harmful aspects, which can be attributed to a lack of mental health literacy as well as the knowledge and skills to provide proper emotional support to fellow firefighters. There is a significant opportunity to leverage the internal strength and positive aspects of the fire family to help better address the mental health needs of volunteer firefighters.

The lack of mental health services, systems, and resources that are typical of rural communities creates a tendency to look inward to internal sources for support. The fire family provides a unique strength and opportunity to address mental health concerns by working with the informal peer support system that already exists by building the tools and capacities of firefighters to help each other. Rural, volunteer fire services likely do not have the capacity or funding for formalized peer support. Formalized peer support should certainly continue to be built and made accessible to volunteer firefighters across Canada; however, it was evident throughout this study in rural volunteer firefighter settings that firefighters and officers are leaning on each other and seeking out the person they are most comfortable speaking to within their fire family in informal ways. Therefore, only having training opportunities for a select few to provide formalized peer support may not address the needs of the volunteer fire service.

When asked about ways to improve mental health structures and systems within the volunteer fire service, both officers and firefighters want more tools, knowledge of, and capabilities how to respond to the emotional support needs of their fire family. This shows that there needs to be certain tools, resources, and training for all firefighters and fire officers, not just a select few. Firefighters want and need more knowledge and tools such as active listening, communication, and mental health literacy to better respond to their peers who may need emotional or social support. All firefighters and officers need the tools to support each other and are truly the first line of support and help for one another.

Volunteer firefighters lean on each other and depend on one another through a deeply rooted sense of trust due to their shared experience in a high-risk volunteer occupation where they risk their lives with their fellow firefighters each time they step on the fire truck. This internal strength of the volunteer fire service through the fire family structure showcases an exceptional opportunity to invest in training that will build on the knowledge and skills for all volunteer firefighters to support one another.

4.1 Limitations and Future Directions

Given the design of the study, there was only a small number of participants from three rural fire departments in Nova Scotia for the main aspects of the study. While the information presented in this paper is relevant to all volunteer firefighters, the information is limited. A larger sample size would provide more transferable data. Further research with a larger sample size is needed to further understand how the fire family culture and the strength of the internal social support network can be leveraged to better address the unique mental health needs of volunteer firefighters.

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