

Surrey Fire Services' Attendance Management Program

Effective Practices for Managing Absenteeism



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Program Overview

The Surrey Fire Service introduced an Attendance Management Program (AMP) in 2003 to reduce employee absenteeism. The program outlines a procedure for managing unsatisfactory staff attendance, using a series of progressive steps that include letters, counseling and positive reinforcement. The first of its kind in the province, the program was a response to a gradual increase in absenteeism at Surrey Fire Service, which is one of British Columbia's (BC) largest fire departments, with 17 fire halls and more than 364 firefighters.

The joint Union-management program has created a noticeable impact on both staffing levels and employee morale, demonstrated by both decreases in sick leave and increases in perfect attendance. In 2012, 67% of employees had perfect attendance (compared to 38% in 2000), and almost 16% of employees had perfect attendance for at least 5 consecutive years. Absenteeism rates in 2012 were 68.3% lower than in 2000 and 45% lower than the 10-year average (calculated from 2000 to 2009).

Over the past twelve years the, Surrey Fire Service has experienced a 68% reduction in both Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) absences and in sick leave, resulting in a cumulative savings of more than \$9.15 million.¹

The AMP has become a model of Union-management cooperation and human resources best practices, and in 2004 received a Community Excellence Award for Best Practices from the Union of B.C. Municipalities (UBCM). Surrey freely shares information about the program with other municipalities and a report on the program has been placed on file in the UBCM's Community Excellence Awards Library for public review.

Background

The City of Surrey has a long-time practice of monitoring staff attendance for all its departments, including the fire service because of the cost and operational implications. When research for the AMP began in 1999, absenteeism within Surrey Fire Service had grown to the point that the organisation was sometimes unable to meet minimum staffing levels for calls.

Assistant Chief Ron Price, who initiated the project, discovered a program in the United Kingdom that ultimately served as the model for Surrey's effort. Nothing like it existed in Canada at the time.

The project team – which included the fire department management, the City of Surrey's human resources department and the Surrey Fire Fighters Association local 1271 (the Union) – spent about 12 months defining the program's parameters, approach and procedures. For consistency, templates were created for letters to employees and a format and guidelines were prepared for employee counseling sessions. After a successful pilot phase, the program was officially adopted by labour and management in August 2003.

Oversight of the program was the responsibility of fire department management. Assistant Chief John Watt took over the project in the latter part of 2002 as part of his administrative duties. Deputy Chief Jon Caviglia assumed responsibility for the program in 2007, following a one-year period during which the AMP had no direct oversight due to staff availability. This issue is addressed in more detail in the Results section of this report (see p.4).

¹ Adjusted to current contract wage rates at time of publication.

The Union's participation in the project was in-part based on the sick leave pay structure that sees the city paying for the first day of absence and the Union paying for the next six days, using a fund supplied by member payroll deductions. Like the employer, the Union was facing higher costs, and combined neither party favoured the previous adversarial relationship regarding absenteeism.

Thus, the Union and management had a shared interest in reducing absenteeism. In addition, the relationship Surrey Fire Chief Len Garis has developed with the Fire Fighters Association over the years has resulted in generally higher levels of cooperation and consensus building between the fire service's Union and management.

Key to the collaborative process was an underlying assumption that employees' absences are legitimate and that the program is in no way an attempt to identify or punish sick leave abuse. The Union was initially reluctant to legitimize the project, but agreed to be involved after recognizing its objective approach.

The AMP is intended to promote and achieve high attendance levels from all employees, reduce costs and disruption to the operation, define management's roles and responsibilities with respect to this issue, and lay out a consistent approach to handling absenteeism that ensures all employees are treated fairly and consistently. The AMP also aims to make employees aware that:

- The employees are important to the department and its work to protect and serve Surrey's citizens,
- The employees are expected to be at work on time and in a fit condition, and
- Sick leave is an unfunded insurance plan that costs both the city and the Union members.

The program has evolved since its inception, as it has gradually increased the awareness amongst employees of their responsibilities. Revisions to policies in recent years have placed a greater emphasis on employee expectations, and language was inserted in the collective agreement that states, "The onus lies with employees to inform the employer of their availability for regular or alternate duty." In addition, language in the employer's policies and operational guidelines provides detailed information to inform and guide employees during absences.

The reaction from employees has been positive and the culture continues to evolve, to the point that employees will often contact the employer before a scheduled absence and discuss their return-to-work options. In addition, the employer will meet with new employees that exhibit a trend of frequent absenteeism before they surpass the program trigger point. These meetings usually result in an immediate improvement.

At the root of the AMP is the contractual nature of the employment relationship – in return for their paycheques, staff members are expected to provide reasonable attendance and performance of duties. So, while managers will do whatever they can to help staff members improve their attendance, an ongoing unacceptable level of absenteeism will not be tolerated and will result in dismissal. This is consistent with Brown and Beatty's Canadian Labour Arbitration which states, "The first basic principle is that innocent absenteeism cannot be grounds for discipline, in the sense of punishment for blameworthy conduct. However, arbitrators have agreed that, in certain very serious situations, extremely excessive absenteeism may warrant termination of the employment relationship, thus discharge in a non-punitive sense."

The Attendance Management Process

Based on labour-management discussions and historic absenteeism data, it was determined that employees would enter the AMP after either (a) five occurrences of absenteeism, or (b) three occurrences that amount to

more than seven shifts in a calendar year. There is some flexibility, however. Employees who exceed the benchmark but were away for obvious reasons could be removed from the list. As well, employees might be investigated for culpable absenteeism and dealt with outside the AMP if their absences are suspicious or form a pattern.

The list is compiled annually and monitored quarterly, with regular consultation with the union when names are added or deleted. Employees stay on the list for the same length of time that their absences exceeded the program criteria. At the minimum, employees must have at least 12 months of consistent attendance to be removed from the list.

The program consists of five progressive steps that, in the case of an employee with continuing absenteeism, include four letters, three counseling sessions and, finally, dismissal. Those with improved attendance for the required period of time receive a letter of congratulations from the Assistant/Deputy Chief in charge of the program, a copy of which goes in their personnel file. These successful employees are then removed from the AMP.

Employees in the AMP are expected to do whatever is necessary to improve their attendance record, including perhaps changing their lifestyle or seeking help of some kind. Management's role, in the meantime, is to keep accurate records, review attendance profiles, conduct positive counseling interviews, reinforce employee responsibilities and offer assistance.

The employer and the Union continually evaluate the program and make changes where appropriate. In 2013, it was agreed that in the first stage of the program an informational bulletin would replace a more formal letter that was copied to Human Resources and the Union. This bulletin informs the employees they have entered the AMP, explains the program and its necessity, and encourages the employees to seek help if need be to improve their attendance.

If the absences continue, an interview is set up with an Assistant/Deputy Chief and a second document (a formal letter) is provided to the employee. A union representative also attends the interview, at which the Assistant/Deputy Chief attempts to identify the cause of the problem, offers assistance, reviews the absenteeism policy, informs the employee his/her record of attendance is unacceptable and asks for a commitment to improve it. The accompanying letter further confirms the discussion and is filed to human resources, the Occupational Health Advisor, the Fire Chief, the Union, and the Shift Battalion Chief.

Employees who reach this second stage are required to provide a doctor's certificate for all absences within seven days of returning to work or face disciplinary action. This remains a requirement until the employee leaves the AMP.

Stage three, for employees with continued absenteeism, includes a similar counseling session and letter, although with a more serious tone to make the employee aware of the urgency of the situation. Again, a Union representative attends the meeting and the letter is filed to the same parties as in stage two.

The fourth stage includes a third counseling session and third letter. The Human Resources Manager joins the Assistant/Deputy Chief and Union representative at this meeting to impress upon the employee the seriousness of his/her position. Employees who reach this stage are given a final warning that if their attendance does not improve, they will be dismissed. As before, a letter reinforces the meeting and is filed to the various parties.

The fifth stage, termination, includes a meeting between the employee, Human Resources Manager, Assistant/Deputy Chief and Union representative. The employee is then advised that his/her failure to show improvement after several warnings has led to the termination of his/her employment contract.

It is important to note that the procedures laid out in the AMP are only a guideline. The steps are intended to resolve chronic absenteeism and help employees, but they may be modified to fit particular situations. For example, there may be some cases in which employees are not dismissed after completing the first four stages, such as if an employee can demonstrate there is a reasonable likelihood their attendance will improve. Alternatively, an employee may be terminated after fewer meetings and letters if the absenteeism is severe enough to warrant it.

Results

Although the AMP was officially introduced in 2003, this section includes results from 2000 to 2012 to reflect the AMP pilot program that began in 2000.

Surrey Fire Service saw a marked improvement in attendance as soon as it began the AMP pilot in 2000. The program immediately reversed the department’s escalating absenteeism of the 1990s, reducing the need for staffing back and new hires to maintain staffing levels.

Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2, below demonstrate the cumulative and year-to-year effect of the AMP on sick and WCB leave since the program has been in effect. Individual firefighters in 2012 took an average of 2.9 sick days and 0.4 Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) days, for a total of 3.3 days compared to 7.6 sick and 2.5 WCB for a total of 10.1 days in 2000. In total, absenteeism from sick/WCB days dropped by 68% from 2000 to 2012. It is important to note, from Figure 2, that these improvements in attendance leave have been achieved during a period where Surrey’s career fire fighter numbers have increased by 28.2%.

TABLE 1. SURREY ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT RESULTS, 2000-2012 CUMULATIVE

| Data time period | Employees | Sick | WCB | Total |
|-------------------------|-----------|------|-----|-------|
| Surrey (2000) | 284 | 7.6 | 2.5 | 10.1 |
| Surrey (Avg. 2000-2009) | 326 | 4.9 | 1.1 | 6.1 |
| Surrey (2010) | 356 | 2.7 | 0.9 | 3.6 |
| Surrey (2012) | 364 | 2.9 | 0.4 | 3.3 |

FIGURE 1. SURREY ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT RESULTS: GROUPED YEARS 2000-2012

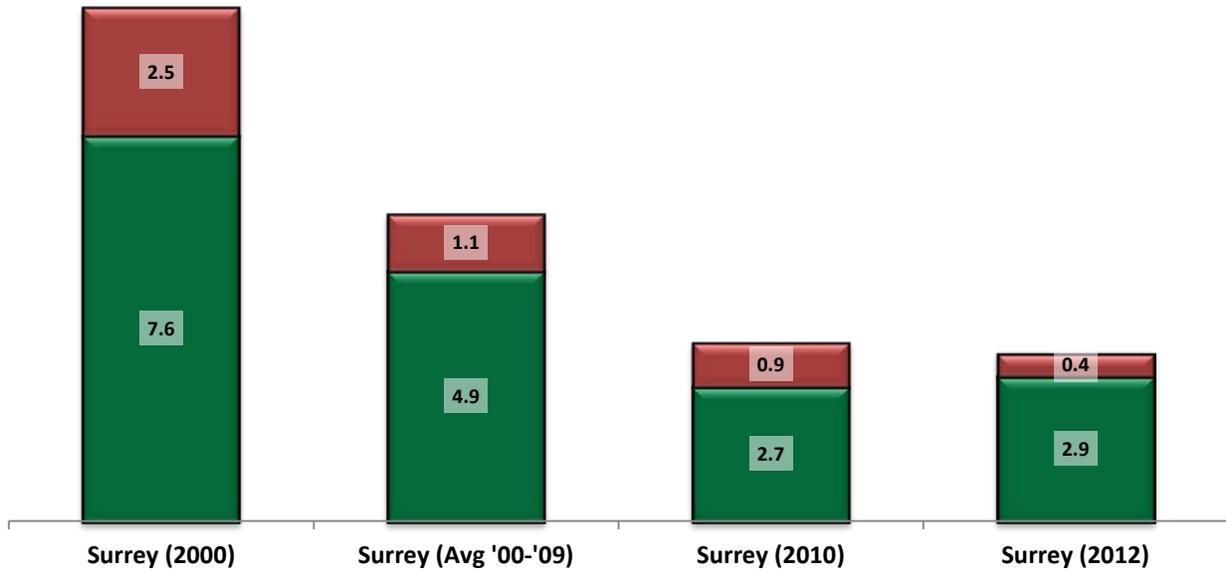


FIGURE 2. SURREY ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT RESULTS: ALL YEARS 2000-2012

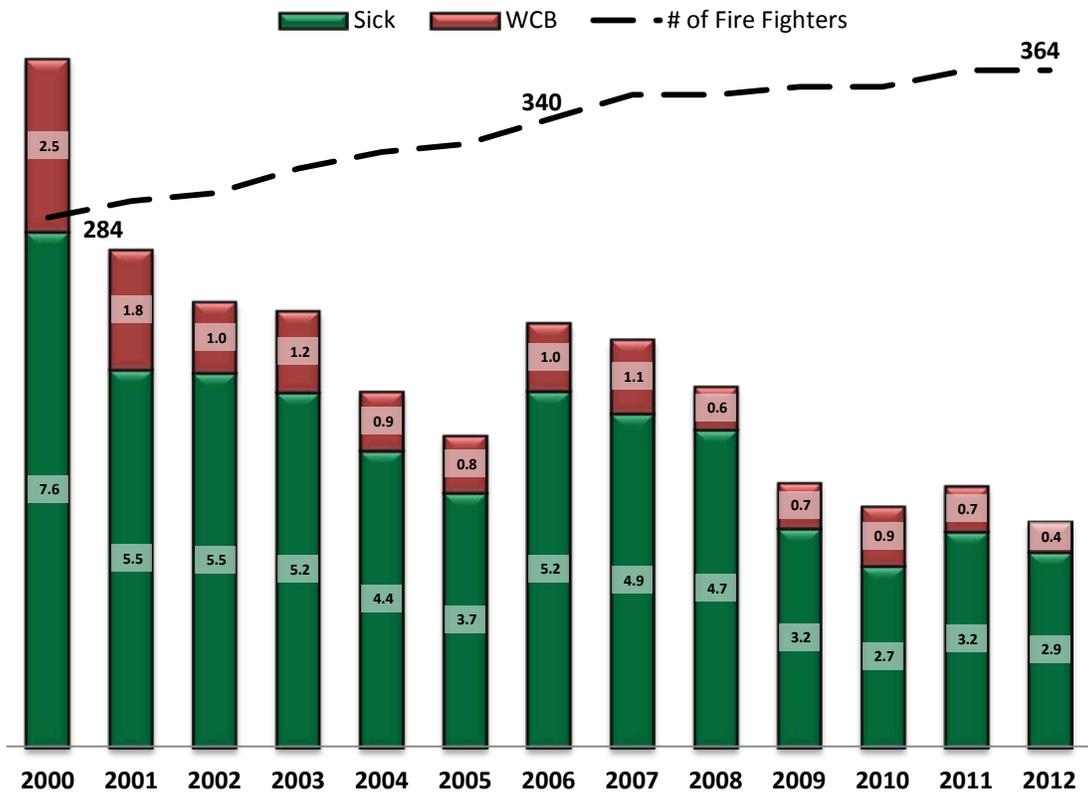
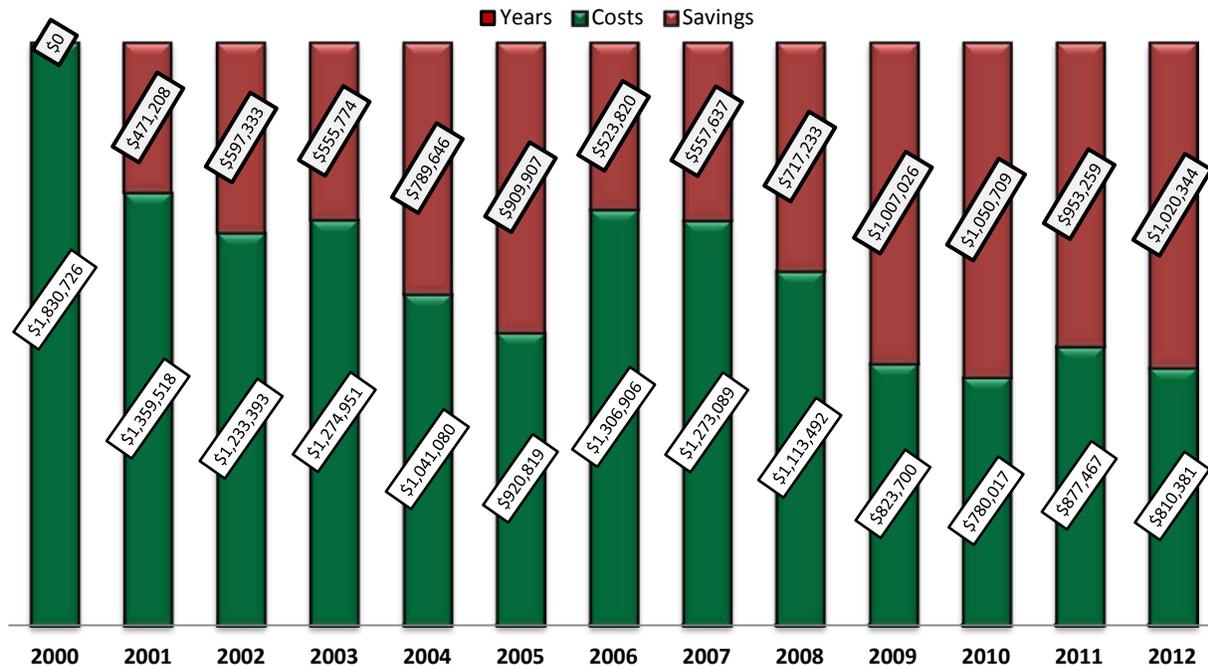


Figure 3, below, shows the savings achieved and costs averted since the AMP was introduced. As the program has become more entrenched in the department culture, the annual savings have continued to grow, more than doubling from \$471,208 in 2001 to \$1,020,344 in 2012, for a total savings of more than \$9.15 million.² Absenteeism-related staffing costs have also continued to decline, from \$1.83 million in 2000 to \$810,381 in 2012 – a reduction of almost 50%. As indicated in Figure 2, above, the size of the fire fighter workforce increased substantially over this time. As a result, the costs per person reduced from \$6,446 in 2000 to \$2,226 per person in 2012. It should be noted that the savings and costs reflect Surrey’s practice of staffing back at straight time. The savings would be even more significant if Surrey staffed back at time and a half, as is common at most departments.

FIGURE 3. SURREY ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT RESULTS, SAVINGS ALL YEARS 2000-2012



In addition to these reduced costs, Surrey Fire Service management has observed improved morale among the crews in the past decade. It appears the department has experienced a culture change, in which firefighters understand their value to the organization and take measures to miss as few days as possible. Perfect attendance can be one indicator for gauging morale and behavioural change. In 2012, 67% of the department’s employees had perfect attendance compared to 38% in 2000, and almost 16% had perfect attendance for at least 5 consecutive years.

Impact of Oversight on Program Success

As noted earlier, due to staff availability and starting in late 2005, the AMP was not directly supervised for a period of approximately a year. The effect was immediate and dramatic, as indicated in the data for 2006 and 2007 in Figures 2 and 3, above. Without firm direction and guidance for the program, behaviours changed

² Adjusted to Surrey Fire Services’ current contract wage rates at time of publication.

quickly and absenteeism escalated. Following the appointment of a new supervisor for the AMP in 2007, it took four years of dedicated management to achieve results similar to 2005.

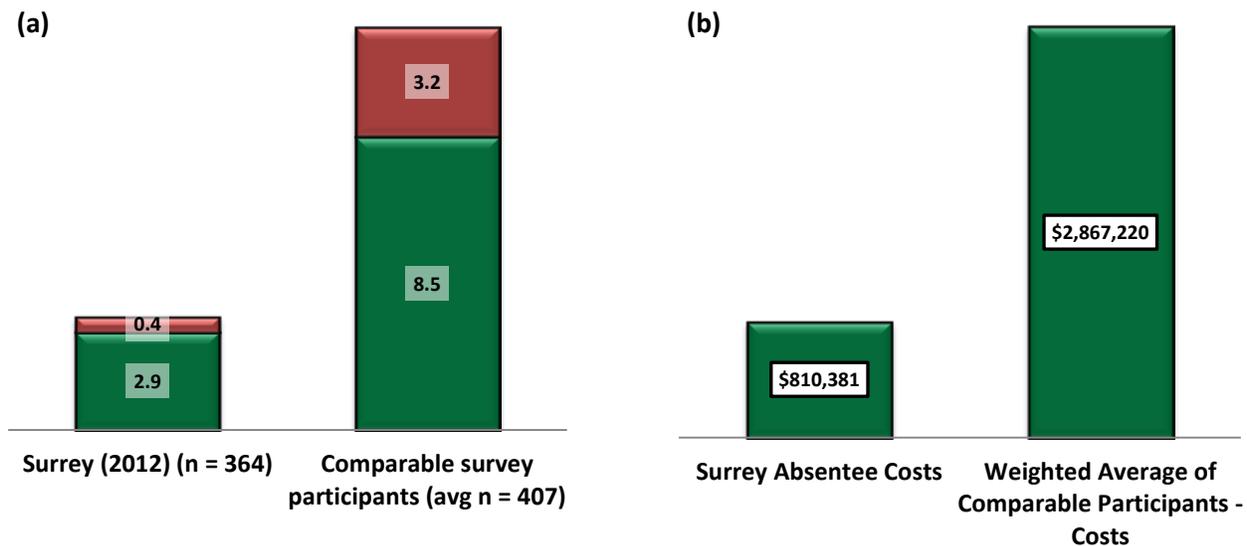
This highlights the need for a dedicated AMP manager who has adequate rank and an understanding of the nuances of the organization. Day-to-day program management makes up approximately 10-15% of the workload of the existing AMP manager, who has the rank of Deputy Chief.

Comparison to Other Departments

A 2013 survey shows that Surrey’s sick leave and WCB use is significantly less than its Lower Mainland counterparts. According to the survey, Surrey firefighters used less than one third the sick and WCB days in 2012 than the average of the 10 surveyed departments. Surrey’s replacement costs (\$810,381) in 2012 were also less than a third of the average of the comparable departments (\$2,867,220), adjusted to Surrey Fire Services’ current contract wage rates at time of publication.

Further, although sick time tends to be higher in larger departments (due to anonymity, morale, etc.), Surrey’s absenteeism continues to decline while its workforce expands. Comparatively, Surrey had less than one third of the number of WCB, and sick days as departments of a comparable size (see Figure 4(a), below), with the corresponding savings (assumed to have been staffed at straight time) displayed in Figure 4(b).

FIGURE 4. (A) ABSENTEES PER FIRE FIGHTER AND (B) COSTS FOR ABSENTEE HOURS, SURREY VS. COMPARABLE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS, 2012



Surrey’s figures also appear favourable when compared to employees across Canada – both in the public and private sector. An April 22, 2011, article in the Toronto Star reported that workers in Canada’s public sector averaged 10.3 sick days in 2009, while workers in the private sector took an average of seven sick days in 2009.

Other Tools

To complement the AMP, Surrey Fire Service employs other human resources tools designed to reduce absenteeism. For example, the department has been applying its graduated return program more consistently in the last few years for staff on long-term medical leave. Management has observed that staff assigned temporary alternative or light duties tend to recover more quickly than those who complete their convalescence at home.

In recent years, Surrey Fire Service has also introduced cost-sharing for private treatment or diagnostic medical tests such as MRI or CT scans. The funds are only available to employees willing to pay half the cost of the test or treatment. In some cases, the program has shaved months off an employee's time away from work, because it reduces time spent on waiting lists and often results in shorter recovery times. The fire service considers the cost-sharing program an investment in its employees' health, much like its other long-running health and wellness initiatives. For example, each hall is equipped with exercise equipment and time is allotted on each shift for fitness training. Hepatitis B and influenza vaccinations (70 % participation) are provided free to employees. Activities by the in-house wellness program have included bringing in a nutritionist to speak, and providing peer fitness trainers to assist employees with their overall fitness. In 2012 the Union and the Employer devoted a considerable amount of effort to support the mental well being of the workforce. A revamped Critical Incident Stress program was unveiled which includes the support of WorkSafeBC Psychologists.

Conclusions

Surrey Fire Service has demonstrated that a consistently managed AMP can succeed in a uniformed, Union environment. With its easily adaptable format, Surrey's AMP has broad potential for use in both the public and private sectors. The program has become a model of Union-management cooperation and human resources best practices.

As a result of the AMP, Surrey now has among the best staff attendance for BC fire departments. Surrey will continue to refine and improve the AMP, and expects the program to deliver a further reduction of absenteeism in 2013 and to continue to achieve significant cost savings as well as operational benefits such as manageable absenteeism levels, greater productivity and increased morale. With a work force of 364 fire fighters there are currently only 11 employees in the AMP, 8 of which are at the first stage (awareness level) and three that have progressed beyond the first stage.

Author Biographical Information

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