

## Medical Evaluations for Emergency Service Organizations

Every Emergency Service Organization (ESO) is dependent on personnel to carry out their mission. Our dedicated members are both our most valued and most costly asset to protect and support. Replacing and retaining quality members is a daily struggle for most ESOs. These same members are in control of other large, expensive, and risky assets of the department and are asked to operate them under extreme conditions.

As leaders in the health and safety of our community, we should be concerned about the health and safety of our members first. Medical evaluations and subsequent safety training can have multiple benefits and should be a priority for all ESO leadership.

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### Benefits

Medical evaluations seek to improve the overall health and wellness of the members of your agency. Serious health conditions, chronic or acute, may be detected early, enhancing treatment options and improving recovery rates. Additionally, medical assessments may help reduce on-the-job injuries and improve work performance and morale. The long-term health of the member not only increases the longevity of service to the department; it also helps create a culture of safety and lets the member know the agency cares about their wellbeing.

Additionally, a healthy ESO staff is financially beneficial. A healthy staff can help reduce Workers Compensation Insurance cost as healthy employees are less likely to sustain injuries, and if they are injured, recovery times may be shorter. Fewer injuries can mean lower premiums. From the general budget, less overtime must be paid to cover open shifts for an injury or sick time. Turnover is also lower, reducing costs to recruit, retain, and train employees.

Performing medical evaluations helps protect the community in more ways than responding to an emergency. If a member with an unknown or untreated health condition operates the ESO vehicles, they may be placing the public at a greater risk. Medical evaluations will help make leadership aware of any health conditions that might impair the member's performance. Furthermore, a healthy ESO staff portrays a positive image for the community.

### Considerations

A CDC/NIOSH study revealed that at any given time 10% of all first responders are out of work due to an on the job injury. Of that number, 72% of those injuries are soft tissue (sprains and strains). These injuries are usually caused by improper job techniques and/or a lack of overall employee health. (Audrey Riechard, 2016) Our behaviors are learned over time and many injuries are cumulative bad habits.

Medical evaluation programs have many levels of intensity based on the size, available resources, and financial capability of the ESO. VFIS has developed the [Annual Medical Statement of Personnel](#) for those agencies wishing to develop a simple program with minimal cost. This form incorporates a health questionnaire that asks each member to disclose any current medical conditions they are aware of and whether the condition is being treated by a physician and is under control. The form is voluntary and serves only to alert management to any potential health issues that might be a concern to the agency. This concept allows the ESO to make determinations if the member should be restricted to certain task(s) in the agency. It is important to advise members of the voluntary nature of the program and to obtain each member's informed consent to participate. Disclose to members how the form will be used and protected, as accurate responses are more likely if the members know the information will be protected.

A comprehensive program will require the assistance of a medical officer, agency health care professional, or third party vendor to perform physical testing and evaluations. Many medical vendors use a total system for pre-hire evaluations, injury prevention, workers compensation functions, and return to work testing. These programs usually include one or more of the following components:

- On-site evaluations of the task required to perform each job;
- Measuring forces needed to complete the task, such as required lifting limits, pounds of force applied, and range of motion;
- Created or edited job descriptions to match the parameters identified;
- Maintenance of the agency members to include pre-hire/membership, return to work considerations and fit for duty schedules; and
- Training on specific injury prevention techniques base on the specific job task.

### Conclusion

VFIS recommends that each ESO consider some type of Medical Evaluation Program. A healthy membership protects the agency and protects the community. For more information, contact your local agent, VFIS regional director or VFIS Risk Control Services.

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### References

- Audrey Riechard, M. O. (2016). Emergency Service Workers Injury Rates. Division of Safety Research. Washington, DC: NIOSH.
- Bryan Fass, E.-P. (2017, January 1). Reducing EMS Provider Injuries. Journal of Emergency Medical Services, pp. 15-19.