

Fireman's Fund HeritageSM Program

Op-ed written for placement by program partner in Jericho, NY

When was the last time you thanked your local firefighters? Usually the first to arrive on the scene of any emergency, they face dangers and challenges every day that most people can't even imagine. That's just the beginning. Today's firefighters' responsibilities go well beyond putting out fires. They protect our neighborhoods and businesses from everything from hazardous waste to mudslides and often put themselves in harm's way to do so.

The job of the typical volunteer or paid firefighter is getting more difficult all the time. In our post-9/11 world, firefighters are asked to prepare for a wider variety of emergencies – everything from mudslides and hurricanes to biological weapons attacks and virus epidemics. Still, the resources to support this critical work are dwindling. Federal, state and local budgets are shrinking and, sadly, most fire departments have unmet needs for equipment, training and community education.

In fact, you may be surprised to know:

- 78 percent of fire departments across the country must raise or seek funds to cover some or all of their expenses.
- One in three firefighters on any given shift does not have the proper equipment needed to enter a smoke-filled building.
- Only 13 percent of fire departments are equipped or trained to handle a chemical or biological incident with 10 or more injured people.
- Volunteer fire departments are at significant risk, accounting for 74 percent of all firefighting personnel and 73 percent of firefighter fatalities in 2004.

(Sources: FEMA, National Fire Protection Association, U.S. Fire Administration)

The Jericho Fire Department is a 130-member volunteer department – one of the many struggling departments right here in our own community. Thanks to a grant funded by the Fireman's Fund Insurance Company, my colleagues at BWD Group and I were able to give the Jericho Fire Department the money they needed to continue to do their job safely and effectively. They received \$15,000 for the purchase of 40 sets of personal protection Emergency Medical Service gear.

This protective clothing, including jacket and pants, are specifically designed to protect first responders from contact with blood- and bodily fluid-borne pathogens – including those that could expose them to HIV, bacterial meningitis, E. coli and avian flu – when responding to emergency medical calls or accidents. The gear will be worn by the firefighters who also work with the department's EMS unit.

The World Health Organization predicts that an avian flu pandemic would affect 25 to 30 percent of the world's population, and the federal government predicts that up to 2 million Americans will die from the virus. Other authorities estimate even more, and many agree that a virus pandemic of some variety will affect us all within the next decade or so. HIV infection also continues to be a risk for emergency medical personnel, with approximately 25 percent of the one million estimated U.S. cases unaware of their infection, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

These facts and warnings underscore the need for properly equipped firefighters who can provide vital emergency services without sacrificing their safety, even during a significant health crisis. The protective gear provided by the Fireman's Fund grant will protect the Jericho Fire Department's EMS unit from dangerous pathogens during emergency calls and help maintain a healthy environment inside their ambulance and fire house. Ultimately, this equipment will help keep our community safe and as functional as possible.

Fireman's Fund's HeritageSM program allows its employees and local agents like BWD Group to direct grants to support local fire departments – those men and women in our communities who risk their lives and every day to protect our businesses, our homes and, most importantly, our lives. Since its start in 2004, the program has granted nearly \$7 million to fire departments across the country, national firefighter organizations and nonprofit fire and burn prevention organizations. Jericho is just one of many communities across the country to benefit.

While it's wonderful to be able to make a difference, there is still so much to do and there are still so many fire service organizations that need encouragement and assistance to continue their work. There are many ways to help. You can contact your local fire department to find out how or to just to thank them for making our communities safer.