



MEDIA ALERT

For immediate release

February 26, 2018

(Tampa) — The Hillsborough County Fire Fighters, (Local 2294), which represents nearly 1,000 Firefighters, Paramedics and Telecommunicators at Hillsborough County Fire Rescue (HCFR), and its collective members are appalled and disappointed by the article published by the Tampa Bay Times online on February 21, 2018, “*Overdoses, DUIs, stolen drugs: Florida’s third-biggest fire rescue department has a problem*” and again on February 25, 2018 in the Sunday print edition.

The men and women of Local 2294 serve the citizens of Hillsborough County faithfully with unyielding dedication, professionalism and work to provide a premier standard of care. Our members have chosen their career because they have been motivated to serve, protect and contribute back to the community they live in.

The article casts a veil of vilification over all the collective members of Local 2294 and served no greater purpose than to attempt to undermine the public trust in our members’ service and commitment to the citizens of Hillsborough County. The malicious and unnecessary publication of our members’ names did nothing to enhance the storyline other than attempt to publicly embarrass them and sensationalize a topic for the hopes of increased viewership. Our members’ reputations and careers have been tarnished by the latent insinuations and dispersions cast over all with the biased information reported.

In 2017 alone our members responded to over 100,000 emergency calls, consisting of any number of difficult situations that are potentially and frequently traumatic, posing a great risk to our personal health and safety. These situations often serve as the catalyst for creating profound physical and psychological burdens on them and their families. The repetitive exposure to traumatic and stressful events and the gradual desensitization to these situations creates the breeding ground for suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder and subsequent coping behaviors like substance abuse.

Local 2294 does not condone or promote the use of illegal drugs, the abuse of prescription drugs or any substance abuse in any manner or form. To this point, the collective bargaining agreements governing the employment conditions for each bargaining unit provide for both reasonable suspicion and the random testing of its members, while also protecting and maintaining the private interests of each member. These agreements are dynamic documents that have changed over the lifetime of their existence and will continue to be amended and refined as both parties see fit in the future. The ebb and flow of negotiations was alluded to in the article with the reference to HCFR administration’s desire to have a 100% Drug Free Workplace, however it should be noted this is not possible when the Executive and Administrative Staff have refused during the most recent negotiations to submit to the same random drug testing themselves.

Since 2010 HCFR has conducted no less than 6,500 substance abuse tests on randomly selected rank and file employees. In January of each year 50% of our members are selected for testing and subsequently each July another 50% are selected per the terms of the contract agreed to by Local 2294 and HCFR. Additionally, HCFR has the right and ability to test members under the premise of a reasonable suspicion standard like any other Drug Free Workplace employer. The incidents mentioned in the article while seemingly sensational, and albeit unacceptable, are actually below statistical norms for the employment

Hillsborough County Fire Fighters, Local 2294



industry. This is not an excuse nor a pardon for this behavior. We are, however, realists and know the men and women of Local 2294 are human and are subject to the same frailties and failings of any other person, or profession. The major difference is that our members are exposed to the distinct and traumatic occupational exposure risks of the fire service. Knowing this Local 2294 has historically worked closely with HCFR administration to not only reduce, but attempt to eliminate the incidents of substance abuse and we will continue to do so. We will continue to work for and further enhance the health and safety of our members as well as the standard of service provided to the citizens of Hillsborough County through mutual collaborative efforts.

In closing, Local 2294 would like to express to Mr. Contorno, and the community, the utter disappointment that this news article's focus was spent sensationalizing the improper behavior of a very small percent of Firefighters, Paramedics and Telecommunicators. As important as this fact may be, the real story and larger issue that needs to be examined is the darker side of being a Firefighter, Paramedic or Telecommunicator. If Mr. Contorno had focused on exposing the horrific stressors our members encounter every duty day; the physical and emotional pain endured by them; or the scars that are carried both internally and externally for the rest of their lives, he could have been a hero. Had Mr. Contorno used the Tampa Bay Times to highlight the issue of substance abuse in the Fire Service, and why it exists at all, and what else can be done to provide help and assistance to those who need it, Mr. Contorno could have been a hero. A hero to those men and women who are often referred to as such by asking the question, "Why is it these men and women are seeking these behaviors and suffering from a rise in post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide?" We need to have an open conversation, peer-to-peer training, professional mental counseling, departmental resources and support on these issues to address this increasing problem in the fire service. Rather Mr. Contorno's news article with the multi-colored, sensationalized headline and fragmented accounting of events and information overplayed itself and in the process trampled on the reputations and integrity of all the men and women of Hillsborough County Fire Fighters, Local 2294.

Submitted By:
Hillsborough County Fire Fighters, Local 2294 Executive Board

Fire Service Statistics

- Most fire fighters will recall with ease at least three horrific emergency calls or tragic events that replay over and over in their minds.
Fire fighters and paramedics may believe that PTSD will go away on its own in time and, therefore, do not need treatment, or that seeking treatment will hurt their reputation or not remain confidential. PTSD can have devastating consequences if untreated or misdiagnosed and is often associated with other mental health disorders, such as depression, substance abuse, family dysfunction, violence and increased risk of suicide. United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. Co-occurring Conditions.
www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co_occurring/index.asp
- The National Firefighters Foundation reports that in any year, a department is four times more likely to experience the suicide death of a member than a line-of-duty death. NFF, 2014
- A confidential online survey was sent to thousands of firefighters to hear directly from them about the impact of post-traumatic stress on their lives, and to learn what services are available when they need help. From across North America, 7,000 firefighters responded, overwhelmingly reporting that stressful or traumatic experiences on the job have impacted their mental health. Among the struggles they say are directly connected to the job: 19 percent have had thoughts of suicide, 27 percent have



struggled with substance abuse, 59 percent have experienced family and relationship problems and 65 percent are haunted by memories of bad calls. International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), NBC New York and NBC Bay Area, 2/22/18

- The career prevalence estimates of suicide ideation, plans, attempts, and non-suicidal self-injury were found to be 46.8%, 19.2%, 15.5%, and 16.4%, respectively. Key factors associated with increased risk for reporting suicidal thoughts and behaviors included lower firefighter rank, fewer years of firefighter service, membership in an all-volunteer department, a history of professionally responding to a suicide attempt or death, and active duty military status. Department of Psychology, Florida State University, 2015.
- According to the Journal of Occupational Health, approximately 20 percent of fire fighters and paramedics have PTSD. Cornell, W., Beaton, R., Murphy, S., (1999). *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 4, 131-141

References

Pelham, Bailee. (2016). "Saving Our Heroes: A Longitudinal Study of Mental Disorders Within the Fire Service." Scripps Senior Theses.

Wilmont, J. (2014, May 1). "Trouble in Mind," *NFPA Journal*; 53-59.

Brady, K.T., Back, S.E., & Coffey, S.F. (2004). Substance abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13, 206-209.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). (2008 – 2012 Survey). "Industry Statistics," The National Drug-Free Workplace Alliance (NDWA). <http://www.ndwa.org/drug-free-workplace/industry-statistics/>. February 20, 2018.

Antonellis, P Jr & Thompson, D. (2012, Dec. 1). "A Firefighters silent killer: Suicide," *Fire Engineering*; 165(12):1-10.

Gunderson, J; Grill, M; Callahan, P; Marks, M. (2014, March). "An Evidence-Based Program for Improving and Sustaining First Responder Behavioral Health," *JEMS, Responder Resilience*," *JEMS*, 57-61.

Bourgeois, P. (2/15/2013). Behavioral Health Programs in the Fire Service. National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's Everyone Goes Home Program.

Cornell, W., Beaton, R., Murphy, S., (1999). *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 4, 131-141.

United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. Co-occurring Conditions. (www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/co-occurring/index.asp).

International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), NBC New York and NBC Bay Area, 2/22/18.

Stanley I.; Hom M.; Hagan C.; Joiner, T. (28 August 2015). "Career prevalence and correlates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among firefighters," Department of Psychology, Florida State University Department of Psychology, Florida State University, 2015.