

Understanding Occupational Health and Safety Culture for BC Aboriginal Fire Crews and Emergency Service Personnel: Research Update

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As a team-oriented paramilitary-like sector, Aboriginal (First Nations and Métis) wildland and structural fire crews and emergency service personnel in British Columbia are involved in high risk community protection activities ranging from fighting wildland forest fires, conducting search and rescue missions, as well as managing disaster responses. Fire crews and emergency service personnel working in Aboriginal communities face additional risks due to factors such as overcrowding and inaccessibility of remote locations, which contribute to elevated fire or related emergency losses (i.e., fatalities, injuries, and property damage). According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), fire incidence, damage, and injury statistics in First Nations communities are consistently higher than comparable non-Aboriginal communities in Canada (CMHC, 2007).

Based on these realities, the First Nations' Emergency Services Society (FNESS) wanted to examine occupational health and safety (OHS) culture for BC Aboriginal wildland and structural fire crews and emergency service personnel based on multiple dimensions:

- Demographics – age, sex, geographic location, years of experience, education, position, and department type;
- Physiological factors – physical health, perceived health, health habits, and health-care practices;
- Psychological factors – personal appreciation of risk, personal commitment to safety, and personal style; and
- Organizational factors – leadership/management commitment, communication and reporting, supportive environment, involvement, and work environment.



First Nations' Emergency Services team. Photo courtesy of the First Nations Emergency Services Society (FNESS).

FNESS also wanted to examine these factors in relation to injury rates, sickness absenteeism, and sickness presenteeism while acknowledging Aboriginal perspectives in understanding OHS culture.

In 2011/2012, FNESS examined OHS culture for Aboriginal wildland and structural fire crews and emergency service personnel in BC. The research study was funded by WorkSafeBC's Focus on Tomorrow "Innovation at Work" program. Led by Principal Investigator, Brent Langlois, the FNESS research team was comprised of researchers and practitioners who specialized in (wildland and structural) firefighting, organizational behaviour, and natural resource management.

The FNESS research team utilized a mixed methods approach consisting of two phases. Phase One involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants in the BC Aboriginal wildland and structural firefighting and emergency management sector. These interviews helped to inform the design of a customized OHS culture web-based questionnaire. In Phase Two, the questionnaire was circulated by census to 100 current/active members of BC's Aboriginal firefighting and emergency service sector. The response rate was 44% (44 out of 100).

The study generated a number of key findings. Documentation and reporting were viewed as important aspects of OHS culture. However, there is a need to educate ill and/or injured workers about their rights and their employers' responsibilities when handling the documentation process for reporting agencies. Health and safety are priorities in this sector. Yet, respondents were undecided as to whether workers who perform their duties in a healthy and safe manner receive any real rewards and recognition. Major health effects in the BC Aboriginal wildland and structural firefighting and emergency management sector were trips and falls, overexertion and heavy lifting, fatigue and burnout, exposure, psychological trauma, respiratory, and work/life balance stress and conflict.

The FNESS research team made a series of recommendations regarding OHS culture for the BC Aboriginal wildland and structural firefighting and emergency management sector that included, but were not limited to i) recognizing that community outreach plays an important role in educating citizens and political leaders about emergency management and fire safety and protection; ii) strengthening the role of FNESS as a centre of excellence for this sector; and, iii) integrating Aboriginal culture into community protection to ensure cultural congruency in recruiting and developing healthy and safe BC Aboriginal wildland and structural firefighting and emergency service personnel.

The FNESS OHS research report can be accessed at http://www.worksafebc.com/contact_us/research/funding_decisions/assets/pdf/2012/RS2010-IG38.pdf (Langlois et al. 2012).

References

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HEALTH AND SAFETY
CULTURE FOR BC
ABORIGINAL FIRE
CREWS AND
EMERGENCY
SERVICE
PERSONNEL:
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