

HEALTH AND SAFETY STRATEGY FOR FIREFIGHTERS IN THE EUROPEAN MEDITERRANEAN AREA

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GUIDE - VADEMECUM FOR THE FIRE FIGHTERS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA

Introduction

In the wake of the “Health and Safety for Firefighters of the Mediterranean Area” project, approved by the European Commission for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities on 22 August 2008, the present Vademecum was drawn up for firefighters and their trade union representatives by the project’s Steering Committee.

We wish to thank Mr. Stefano Supino, the project expert, for the significant scientific contribution he provided by drawing up the questionnaire and analyzing the data collected; Mr. Edelmiro Costas, Mr. Manuel Ariza and the Physicians of the Cuerpo de Bomberos Comunidad; Mr. Sebastian Carton Gutierrez and Mr. Vicente M. Moreno Mellado for their studies on protective gear, medical training and checks in relation to the health and safety of firefighters; the representative of the FBU, Mr. John McGhee, for his contribution to the exchange of experiences at the workshop held in Rome on 19-20 March 2009; Mrs. Penny Clarke, Secretary of EPSU, for the valuable and constant support she provided during every working session.

Firefighters of Portugal, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Greece, Malta: a comparison

The “Health and Safety for Firefighters in the Mediterranean Area” training and educational project was extremely innovative for it involved countries which have recently become EU Member States and countries which aspire to join the UE, including Malta, Croatia and Slovenia. It involved a direct exchange of experiences among the trade union delegates of the participating countries with a view to learning about the organizational models, the health and safety practices of workers, and the levels of trade union protection in place.

The two workshops held in Rome on 19-20 March and in Madrid on 13-14 May 2009 were attended by many trade union delegates from all of the promoting countries. This made it possible to complete the training and education project, which provided a sufficiently clear picture of how firefighters operate in the participating countries and of the differences between the more advanced countries and the ones that are somewhat lagging behind. This is essential in order to identify the common and crucial issues that trade union delegates must focus on in their work with national, local and EU governments.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire provided very useful information on the service and working conditions of firefighters in the Mediterranean area.

- work organization and management;
- health: medical conditions, responsibilities, preventative and follow-up checks, information on risk factors associated with the profession and health checks throughout one’s working life;
- safety: standard operating procedures, protective and standard gear, motor vehicles, training and education;
- investigations on occupational accidents;
- register of intervention statistics and reports on the nature, frequency and severity of work accidents, injuries, occupational diseases or death;
- volunteer work;
- other useful information.

In addition to these items, information was also requested regarding the firefighter's role, career, educational qualifications, wages, and pension; the trade union delegates answered these questions according to their personal point of view, which helped to also get a picture of the trade union representations present in the individual countries.

Scientific data (Risk Management areas and components fig. 3 and 4 of the questionnaire)

The surveys revealed that there is a serious lack of good medical and educational practices in all countries of the Mediterranean area. In a way, this also has to do with the fact that firefighters are looked up to by the population and are seen as indestructible heroes.

Needless to say, that is not the case. The studies presented during the two-day workshop showed that the levels of health and safety enjoyed by workers basically depend on the prevention and protection rules in force in the individual countries regarding the psychophysical conditions of firefighters when they join the profession, periodic medical checks, training firefighters to use the personal protective gear and to how to provide an adequate technical response to the various risk factors they encounter at work.

The education and training initiatives for trade union representatives of firefighters in the countries of the Mediterranean area will have to focus on these aspects in order to step up talks and bargaining in the area of health and safety with employers, while at the same time launching a European dialogue through EPSU delegates.

Personal protective equipments (fig. 8 and 9 of the questionnaire)

This includes clothing and gear used to curb the risks involved in the work of firefighters.

A fundamental contribution was offered by the agreement on personal protective equipment presented at the Madrid workshop, since compliance of such equipment with security standards is an excellent starting point.

In this regard, the EU has issued specific directives to standardise the materials and

manufacturing processes in order to guarantee excellent levels of personal protection. It is necessary to address the non-compliance of institutions of member states that provide this service, which tend to weaken such rules through more permissive national laws geared to make unacceptable savings to the detriment of occupational safety. In order to protect workers, it is also essential to train them to use the personal protective gear properly. Information must be provided on the materials and manufacturing processes so that firefighters may learn to identify any flaws that may jeopardize their efficiency at crucial moments.

Psycho-physical fitness (Fig 5 and table 4 on health)

The medical report presented in Madrid, based on consolidated experience and on various trials, shows that physical training is essential for firefighters with a view to prevention and protection, which does not mean that they are to be regarded as supermen. Firefighters are expected to be in excellent psychological and physical shape in order to carry out a job that can be very demanding also from a psychological standpoint. Although a firefighter may already possess such features when he is hired, it is important that they be built up through specific training and education to be delivered regularly at work throughout the course of one's working life.

A fire-fighter must be physically fit but also psychologically strong in order to endure the stress of a job fraught with unexpected risks and dangers. Moreover, as studies on the burnout syndrome have shown, witnessing the distress of the people they rescue takes a toll on the psychological equilibrium of the fire-fighter.

Evaluating risk in an occupation so exposed to immense and changing dangers, needs a dynamic constantly updated map, that analyses what really happens on the scene.

Periodical medical checks (fig 7 and tables 4 and 5)

While the psychological and physical conditions of a firefighter are assessed with great rigour when he is hired, the system of medical checks run in the subsequent years proves to be insufficient. This is unacceptable for workers who are exposed to countless occupational hazards and diseases.

Paradoxically, while regulations in the area of medical prevention and vigilance in the various countries of the Mediterranean area are geared towards stric-

ter forms of control in the public and private sectors, for firefighters not even annual medical checks are run to ensure that the psycho-physical conditions required to protect the worker's health are in place.

It would be very useful to have official statistics on occupational accidents and diseases to monitor the phenomena and to allow trade union representatives to demand more effective protection measures of employers.

Considering the indifference with which member states treat care and safety of men and women firefighters, we must work together with EPSU in the EU seat, for the issuing of a European Directive on the nature and extent of injuries, or at least for those undergone in the course of action on the job.

An area that is yet to be explored is the incidence of mental illnesses. This aspect is marginally addressed in blatant cases, when there are evident manifestations of disorders like depression, alcoholism and drug abuse.

It would be useful to provide psychological support on an ongoing basis rather than occasionally when there are evident cases of stress.

Training and protecting the health and safety of firefighters (tables 11-12- 13 of the questionnaire)

Training is one of the most important elements, next to medical surveillance, when it comes to protecting the health and safety of firefighters and avoiding physical and mental disorders at work.

It is all the more essential considering the different requirements entailed in land, sea and air interventions which involve the use of highly sophisticated machines and materials.

The consequences of environmental changes, which force governments and populations to deal with ever more frequent and devastating natural and anthropic disasters, require ongoing training in order to deliver highly professional training to firefighters.

Conclusions

As a result of increased cross-border activity, promoted by the EU, to deal with the natural disasters that have hit the countries of the Mediterranean area over

the years, this “Vademecum” follows in the wake of the “European Firefighters’ Charter” issued on October 2007 as an integral part of EPSU’s trade union policies vis à vis the European Union and aims to step up trade union bargaining in the area of occupational health and safety.

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PARTNERS

1. SSSH UATUC (Union of Autonomous Trade Unions) Croatia
2. FSC- CC.OO. (Comisiones Obreras) Spain
3. FP CGIL, Italy
4. ADEDY Panhellenic Fed. of employees Unions of fire-fighting dept. Greece
5. GWU (General Workers Union) Malta
6. SPGS (Sindikat Poklicnega Gasilstva Slovenije) Slovenia
7. STAL Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores da Administração Local, Portugal
8. EPSU European Public Services Union - Belgium

Portugal firefighters in action

