

Mutual aid formula works for PPE cleaning as well

In the world of firefighting, departments are never alone. When they're called to a large event that challenges their ranks, they call for mutual aid and neighboring fire departments will respond. The team approach of mutual aid keeps all parties safe and helps a fire department accomplish its goal of protecting citizens and property.

This same tactic of leveraging multiple resources for a common goal can be deployed when it comes to keeping firefighters safe through proper gear cleaning. When we tap the expertise of multiple experts, the end results are elevated, and better processes are created.

NFPA 1851 is foundational

We're all familiar with NFPA 1851 laying out the need to properly clean gear. This isn't a question of "if" anymore. Cleaning is non-negotiable and the safety of your ranks is critically dependent on a well-crafted protocol.

But safety goes much further than just cleaning. It's incumbent upon every department to stay current on NFPA best practices. In the years ahead, we'll continue to dial in just what "clean" means. Studies are on-going as associations embark on identifying how clean is clean as well as the effectiveness of current laundering processes.

Again, the idea of mutual aid starts with associations doing the heavy lifting of determining the most effective cleaning methods as well as additional risks to firefighters through transference of carcinogens to other equipment. However, for mutual aid to help each department, they must do their own parts by staying current on the learnings of these on-going studies. Don't assume that because your department has adopted a gear cleaning policy that that's the end of it. Current procedures should be viewed as wet cement – our best first step in stemming the tide of firefighter deaths from cancer. We'll continue to learn more and make changes to reduce risks.

Independent Service Providers answer the call

We can draw a cue from the famous movie quote from Clint Eastwood: "a man has to know his limitations." Those words are especially true in the PPE cleaning realm. Are you a laundry and PPE repair expert? Does anyone in your department wear that title? No? Good thing you have a host of Independent Service Providers (ISPs).

Work with these professionals to establish a cleaning and repair process. They will help identify what can be cleaned and addressed in-house and what requires a bit more attention to ensure ultimate safety and performance of the PPE. Once these guidelines have been created, it takes the pressure off the department – you essentially have a set of ground rules for the house to work from.

Select the right tool for the job

Are there a lot of differences between your station wear and bunker gear? We can all stack hands that the items are radically different. Knowing this, we should all be able to

agree that your PPE requires a very different set of laundry chemicals to remove the harmful carcinogens.

Lean on your ISP and chemical company representative to prescribe the proper chemicals to not only clean gear, but also preserve the technical fibers that make up this life-saving equipment. This part of the process is often overlooked; don't make that mistake. It's of paramount importance to not only use the correct chemicals but introduce them to the wash cylinder at the right time and proper dosage.

Equipment distributor and manufacturer that are invested

The laundry equipment distributor is your local expert, but more than that, they should be connected to a company invested in the fire service industry. Anyone can sell a piece of laundry equipment and walk away. Departments need to align with a true partner.

A true partner will pull together all the components listed above. They will have an advanced knowledge of the unique demands of the fire industry. They will not only take the lead on ensuring PPE-specific programs are loaded on equipment, but also be the go-to resource for training firefighters on how to use the machines properly.

Working with a distributor and equipment manufacturer as invested as you are in the safety of your department is the key linchpin in this mutual aid structure. By enlisting the mutual aid of experts in their respective fields and leaning on the learnings of associations, your department will be well-positioned to ensure the safety of its ranks.