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JANUARY 2026 • VOL. 18 - NO. 11

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On Dec. 6, Johnson Siding Volunteer Fire Department used their new training vehicles to work on skills for vehicle stabilization, cribbing and lifting. See more photos inside.



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Johnson Siding training

On Saturday, December 6, we didn't let a little bit of snow prevent us from engaging in our regular training event. Our focus was enhancing and growing our skills around vehicle stabilization, cribbing, and lifting. The acquisition of our training vehicles has opened up tremendous opportunities to improve our knowledge and become more familiar with the tools and equipment at our disposal. It was a chance to try new things, make mistakes, and understand why certain things work when others don't. Training is the place to identify our weaknesses so in a real-world situation, we can work together to accomplish our goal in keeping with our motto: Slow is Smooth. Smooth is Fast. Anytime you want to attend a training session to see what goes on, feel free to message us to make arrangements. Who knows, you might just find yourself saying; "I could do that"....From the Johnson Siding Volunteer Fire Department Facebook page.



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Black Hills chapter of the Wind and Fire Motorcycle Club raises funds for Children's Home Society

While the roar of engines may have faded from this year's Sturgis Rally, one motorcycle group is keeping the rumble of hope alive for one of South Dakota's most vulnerable populations. This fall, the Black Hills chapter of the Wind and Fire Motorcycle Club raised \$1,238 for Children's Home Society, continuing their longstanding commitment to supporting children and families impacted by trauma. The club collected donations during their "fire boot collection" drive, a tribute to their background in the fire service industry. The Wind and Fire Motorcycle Club is an international group of active and retired firefighters who share a passion for riding Harley-Davidson motorcycles. The Black Hills chapter has been a dedicated supporter of CHS for 11 years and has raised more than \$40,000 during that time, reflecting their deep belief in CHS's mission to prevent, treat and heal trauma for people across South Dakota. "We are deeply grateful to our longtime friends at the Black Hills Wind and Fire Motorcycle Club," said Children's Home Foundation Director of Development Heather Hoeye. "As first responders, they've witnessed the profound impact traumatic events can have on individuals, and they understand how essential hope and healing are to recovery."



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UPCOMING EVENTS

Email your Upcoming Event by the 10th of the previous month (ex. Aug. 10 for the September issue) to jeff@ne-braskafirefighter.com. There is no charge.

JANUARY 9-11, 2026: SD Fire Instructor's Conference, Mitchell, SD.

FEBRUARY 6-8, 2026: Les Lukert Conference, Kearney, NE.

APR. 24-26, 2026: Rushmore Fire Conference.

APRIL 25, 2026: Spring School, Volga, SD.

JUNE 11-13, 2026: 140th South Dakota State Firefighters Association State Fire School, Watertown, SD.

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SDFA OFFICER REPORTS

"Ask a Better Question, Get a Better Answer." Part 1

As we move into a new year, some of us are starting to think about New Year's Resolutions. Now, I wish I could tell you that this works well. However, most of you know that the reality is those resolutions rarely make it past New Year's Day. Today, I am not asking you to make a resolution, I am inviting you to think about how you ask questions and what kind of answers you are currently getting those questions. Now, you know I am angling at first responders, but this applies to other relationships as well. On my shelf is a book, (a rather long and involved book) entitled, Question Centered Therapy (I know what you are thinking, great another piece of "psychobabble"). What intrigues me about this book was the "layman's" version, entitled, Change Your Questions Change Your Life. (That sounds a little more intriguing doesn't it). The point of both of those books is that questions make a difference, and it is in light of that, that I launch into this month's article.

In a recent article in Firefighter Nation, entitled, "Getting Beyond 'Fine': Getting Real Feedback from Firefighters," Alex Zielinski, challenges us to rethink the questions we are asking. If you have spent any time around first responders, if you ask any thing about how they are feeling you will get this kind of standardized responses, "Fine", "Good", "Okay". This is not just confined to the world of first responders, people in general are tired of answering questions from people who seem to care for them,

but in reality, only want to appear to care. By now I know it wouldn't surprise you to know that I am not one to take a shallow answer to my question of "How are you doing?" If I know you have suffered a loss. I have been known to respond to the "Fine" or "Okay" response with, "Don't lie to me. Tell me how you are doing?" Then we can talk about what is going on. However, in the realm of first responders we have developed the fine art of not answering the question, particularly when it comes from an officer in our department. Why is that? Well maybe because of the difference in priorities of leaders and followers. In a survey that compared the top ten priorities of leaders and followers, the top three for followers were appreciation, recognition of work, and genuine concern for employees. Leaders listed the above three priorities at the bottom of their list. Leaders would do well to reconsider what motivates those whom they attempt to lead.

How do you get past the "Fine" when you are genuinely concerned for another. If you have a strong enough relationship, you can try my "obnoxious" response, or maybe better if you follow the advice of Alex Zielinski. Alex is no armchair academic. Alex is a deputy fire chief in Indiana and has been involved in fire service for over 20 years. What Alex brings to the table is not an armchair psychologist perspective but that a man who has earned his stripes in the world of first responders.

Alex points out that most of the time we ask vague questions and so we get vague or sometimes evasive answers. It is a little like talking to a teenager. Ask how is school and

if you're lucky you get a verbal response, like "Fine", or "Ok", or most often a nonverbal shrug of the shoulders.

As with teens, the same responses can be found in fire fighters, who are not known for a lack of verbal communication, when they want to. What can stifle a more robust answer could be, according to Alex, "They don't feel safe to speak up. Maybe they've seen what happens when someone raises a concern—nothing. Or worse, retaliation. They've learned that honesty doesn't lead to change. If feedback has been ignored in the past, why bother giving it again? They're not sure what's appropriate to share. Without clear expectations or a culture of openness, people default to silence." Then compound this with the assumption on the part of leadership that silence means that people are satisfied, we might just miss the level of discomfort, lack of engagement or downright distrust of the leadership. The only way to get past this problem is to ask better questions.

As leaders, we often assume silence means satisfaction, but silence can also mean discomfort, disengagement, or distrust. The only way to know is to ask and ask better questions. The first step is to move from micro management to coaching. In the fire service, we've leaned on control to accomplish the task. Precision, a hierarchy and doing things the right way, are the values we have worked with. However, as Alex points out micromanagement does not build strong teams. Rather than achieving the goals we want, it leads to burnout and increases errors, the two things we thought we were correcting. What is the option? According



Rodney Veldhuizen, Chaplain

"As leaders, we often assume silence means satisfaction, but silence can also mean discomfort, disengagement, or distrust. The only way to know is to ask and ask better questions."

to Alex, coaching focuses on growth and collaboration. It looks at asking purposeful questions, active listening and guiding others toward their own development. Effective leaders don't need to have all the answers, but they need to create an environment where others are encouraged to discover solutions that benefit themselves and the department.

Having spent sometime in the world of coaching and working as a therapist, I have learned the power of a good question. (To be honest, I have managed to ask my share of dumb ones as well). When I am able to ask a good question, I rarely get a "knee Jerk" response or a "Fine" or an "Ok." When it comes to better questions and more open communication within the organization, "How's it going," isn't going to cut it. That question is what we call a closed question, it only requires a simple, "Ok" or "Fine" to answer, and that my friends is just what you will get from a teen or a first responder.

If you want better answers, ask better questions. Alex points out that if everything is going well in your department (keep it quiet or everyone will want to join). The reality

is that the question of "How's it going?" isn't going to generate a lot of discussion. Alex suggests questions like:

Does anything seem inefficient to you?

What do you need help with?

Is there anything that's causing frustration?

These kinds of questions work. "They work because they're specific, open-ended, and focused on the person's experience. They immediately communicate that you want to get below the surface, that you're not just having a superficial pleasant conversation or making small talk." (Alex, FF Nation)

Next time, I will dig deeper into Alex's suggestions as he lays out in more detail better ways to ask questions and some specific examples that can assist you in exploring and opening up the issues for your first responders and will get you well past the "Fine" and "okay" responses we generally get. Until then, why not "test drive" these questions and see what happens?

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U.S. Fire Administration Firefighter Fatality Notification

The following are U.S. Fire Administration Firefighter Fatality Notifications of firefighters who have died from across the United States. The South Dakota Fire Service extends its thoughts to the family and friends of these firefighters.

CAPTAIN MICHAEL A. BOOKE, 57, Northampton Fire Department, Northampton, PA, died on Nov. 12. On October 25, 2025, Captain Michael Booke was attending a water rescue course when he suffered a cardiovascular event after completing a 200-yard swim. Fellow first responders administered life saving measures to Captain Booke and then transported him to a local hospital. Captain Booke remained under care at the hospital where he passed away on November 12, 2025.

FIRE CHIEF JIM MCCOY, 60, Alderson (OK) Fire Department, died on Nov. 1. Chief McCoy was providing fire department standby for a drag racing event when a collision caused a vehicle to leave the race-track, striking McCoy and a police officer, killing them both.

FIREFIGHTER JULIUS SNYDER, 55, Camden (NJ) Fire Department, died on Oct. 27. Firefighter Snyder responded to eight emergency calls while working a 24-hour shift from January 31, 2020, to February 1, 2020. Shortly after his shift ended, Firefighter Snyder suffered a medical emergency. He was taken to a local hospital and subsequently transferred to a regional medical center for emergency surgery. After suffering prolonged complications from the medical emergency he suffered in 2020, Firefighter Snyder passed away on October 27, 2025.

DEPUTY CHIEF JIMMY TOWNSEND, 61, Moncks Corner (SC) Rural Fire Department, died on Sept. 28. On September 27, Deputy Chief Jimmy Townsend responded to two emergency calls during his shift. The following day, Deputy Chief Townsend suffered a fatal cardiovascular event within 24 hours of responding to the second emergency incident.

FIREFIGHTER MICHAEL Z. HEITHAUS, 42, Evansville Volunteer Fire Department, Evansville, AR, died on March 30. Firefighter Michael Heithaus responded to an emergency medical call in the afternoon of March 29, 2025. The following morning, Firefighter Heithaus suffered a fatal cardiovascular event.

DEPARTED FIREFIGHTERS

Janet Lynn Nebelsick 1958-2025

Janet Lynn Nebelsick, age 66, of Alexandria, SD died Tuesday, December 9, 2025 at her home under hospice care. Her Mass of Christian Burial was held December 16, 2025 at St. Mary of Mercy Catholic Church in Alexandria, SD with burial at St. Mary of Mercy Catholic Cemetery.

Janet Lynn (Murray) Nebelsick, daughter of Paul and Irma (Schoenfelder) Murray, was born December 11, 1958 in Parkston, SD.

Janet was a member of the Hanson High School Class of 1977. She was married on September 3, 1976, to Tom Nebelsick at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Alexandria, SD, and together they shared nearly 50 years of marriage.

Janet was a devoted mother, loving wife, caring sister, and loyal friend. She was the heart of her family and a source of strength and laughter to everyone who knew her. She made history in Alexandria by becoming the first female firefighter and the very first member of the Alexandria Fire Department to become a certified EMT, helping to lay the foundation for the town's emergency medical services program.

She also contributed her skills and warmth to the workforce in various roles throughout her life. She worked at Joe's Café (formerly the Kopper Kettle) and the Tomahawk Café, Jarding's Market, Rookie's Bar, Stepping Stones Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Center, the

Hanson County Courthouse as the Assistant Emergency Manager, and Granite Springs Lodge. Her dedication and kindness were evident in every place she worked.

She is survived by her husband Tom; her five children, James of Sioux Falls, Eric (Jessica) of Crooks, Amy Hernandez of Alexandria, Katie (Steve) Huber, of Menno, and Tamara of Alexandria; and

twelve grandchildren, Jim & Aubry Nebelsick, Troy, Myles, & Chet Nebelsick, Shelby, Tye, & Taelynn Hernandez, Hayden & Lexie McNinch, and Callie & Macie Huber. She is also survived by her sisters Marge Smith (Hewitt, TX), Joyce Folsom (Edmunds, WA), Betty (Don) Nebelsick (Abilene, KS), Jackie Stoltz (Alexandria, SD), Mary Jo (Oran) Hoffman (Emery, SD); brother Pat (Jackie) Murray (Alexandria, SD); sister-in-laws Diane (Wayne) Miller (Abilene, KS), Lavonne (Steve) Oswald (Mitchell, SD); and brother-in-laws Richard Nebelsick (Alexandria, SD), Ron (Pat) Nebelsick (Ft. Collins, CO), Dave Nebelsick (Mt. Vernon, SD), Bill (Sherry) Nebelsick (Mitchell, SD).

She was preceded in death by her parents, brother Jim Murray, niece Tracie Nebelsick, father and mother-in-law Duane & Marjorie Nebelsick, brothers-in-law Kenny Smith, Dale Folsom, and Ron Stoltz, and sisters-in-law Debra Nebelsick and Ruth Nebelsick.



Custer County crews keep wildland fire contained

On Tuesday, November 25, in Custer County South Dakota, firefighters from South Dakota Wildland Fire, Black Hills National Forest, Battle Creek Fire Department and the Custer Volunteer Fire Department, despite the cold temperatures, high wind and very high fire danger, successfully contained a wildland fire located approximately four miles south west of Hayward to just under 3 acres.

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SDFA OFFICER REPORTS



Charlie Kludt, President

"The increase in requests for informational input, representation and increased number of volunteered hours being put forth by board members has led us to consider assistance from an Association Management firm. The firm would maintain membership, finances, fire school marketing, registration and contracts, and various other duties that are currently being handled by board members, secretary and treasurer. Several state Firefighter Associations are utilizing the firm management services."

January 2026 New Year, Something New or Knew?

Happy New Year to everyone. It's a new year. What did you learn in 2025?

Did you learn, train, or read about something that was new to you?

Did you attend a school or training that taught you something new about what you thought you already knew? A renew.

Did your department have an incident or close call that made you realize, "We need to know more..."

With every new innovation,

there is an opportunity to learn something more. What seems like a good idea or improvement at the time, may or may not turn out to be an advancement in the right direction. Independent studies are usually more viable information than companies trying to sell goods and services.

The important issue is to keep learning.

The SDFA Board will be meeting in Mitchell on January 9th. Finalizing spring and summer fire schools and reviewing the schedule for use of the mobile burn trailers.

The increase in requests for informational input, representation and increased number of

volunteered hours being put forth by board members has led us to consider assistance from an Association Management firm. The firm would maintain membership, finances, fire school marketing, registration and contracts, and various other duties that are currently being handled by board members, secretary and treasurer. Several state Firefighter Associations are utilizing the firm management services.

The legislative session will be starting in January. The SDFA does not have a particular bill for consideration at this time. We keep an eye out for items that may be of concern to the fire service as the session moves along.

The SDFA will be having an election for President at State Fire School in June. If you are interested or would like to submit a letter of intent to be a candidate, you may submit it to an SDFA district representative, nominating committee member, or secretary by 29 April 2026.

The SDFA will be appointing a new State Director to the National Volunteer Fire Council. The NVFC is the primary national voice for the volunteer fire service. Each state is allowed two (2) members

on the NVFC Board of Directors.

The director position involves attending the NVFC bi-annual conferences in the spring and fall. Opportunities to serve on NVFC committees, NFPA committees, and other nationwide fire service related groups and studies are some of the aspects of serving the position. If you are interested, email or contact me with a letter of interest and any pertinent information that may make you a viable director.

In an effort to provide interested individuals to attend, the SDFA Board voted to allow a member of the SDFA membership to attend the NVFC conferences. This will allow for a succession plan for prospective future directors to become familiar the NVFC and what is involved.

If your department needs assistance with the new National Emergency Reporting Information System (NERIS) to document your run reports, contact the State Fire Marshal's office in Pierre. The old reporting system will be shut down the end of January 2026.

Stay warm and stay safe,

CHARLIE KLUDT
SDFA President

Happy New Year and Hello SD Firefighters:

How was your year? Did you accomplish everything you set out to do this past year? I certainly did not, but it was a productive year.

How is your department doing? Do you have the funding needed to accomplish your mission? Do you have the trained staffing required to respond to calls? Are you sending members to trainings like a district school or state fire school. If not, why? By sending your members to different schools you might get an idea for raising money, recruiting new members while learning new tactics and

seeing new equipment that maybe an answer to a need. You will also get to know and network with other firefighters that you might work with someday.

Instructors Conference will be in Mitchell this year January 9-11. The Instructor's Society is bringing in Chief Thompson who has 45 years of experience in the fire service, both volunteer and paid. His topics are The Functional Fire Company and Training Basics & Essentials. Looks to be a good couple of days.

The South Dakota Firefighters Association will be holding our Winter meeting on Friday before Instructor's Conference starts. Fire school planning will be the main



Don Ward, Vice President

"Instructors Conference will be in Mitchell this year January 9-11. The Instructor's Society is bringing in Chief Thompson who has 45 years of experience in the fire service, both volunteer and paid."

topic along with legislative issues. We will get a report from our lobbyist and pass along the information on the items we are watching. Kind of a short letter this month. Merry Christmas to all of you and

stay safe.

DON WARD
VP SDFA
605-645-2689

Thoughts From The Tailboard

Happy New Year. I hope the Christmas holidays were good to you and you were able to enjoy family and share some time together. Christmas is one of those times we seem to take a step back and think about a number of different aspects of our lives. Hope it was all good for you.

Ready or not here it is. The NEW YEAR. You know what that means don't you? Besides taxes, calendar changes, and wondering where the past year went. It means lots of things in our lives change too. Some for the good, and some we just hate, and others the verdict is still out. The SD Firefighters Association is no different. The Board is considering some changes that in the short term a person may ask why? But in the long term, looking down the road and what is best for the firefighters of South Dakota it may be the best road.

When someone asks you why are you a firefighter, one of those reasons generally is to help others in their time of need. I mean besides the excitement of driving hot, or squirting water, or all the fun stuff. I've been in the fire service for 49 years. In all those years I've never had any serious accidents or injuries. Small cuts, twisted an ankle on a wildland fire, or slammed a finger in a door. Darn that hurts. However, about one month ago while helping move a patient down some steps on a medical call, I suddenly felt a pain in my lower back. To make a long story very short after doctor's visits, injections, and some PT it is all good. However, at the end of my doctor's visit I asked him if I could go back to responding? He said no reason not to, but next time get some help. That made me think. We help the citizens we serve. Do we help our fellow firefighters? Think about the next time the pager goes off and you tell yourself, I'll



Denny Gorton, Retired Treasurer/Past President

"The Board is considering some changes that in the short term a person may ask why? But in the long term, looking down the road and what is best for the firefighters of South Dakota it may be the best road."

let someone else handle this call or I just don't feel like it right now. Maybe, just maybe, it will be your firefighter that needs help. Lifting, carrying, doing whatever. We serve the public, but we also serve each other. Just a thought.

No monthly article, especially at this time of year would be complete without a pitch to remember to get your 2026 100% membership dues paid. I'm not going to list all the benefits your firefighters receive, but there are many. Some depart-

ments have already taken care of that, and we thank you for it. Ask the Chief or treasurer if your department has paid their dues. It's well worth your time to be sure.

With that I'll close for this month. If you made any New Years resolutions, we all know how hard they are to keep. I only made one resolution this year, not to make any resolutions. So far it's working.

DENNY

SDFA OFFICER REPORTS

The State of The South Dakota Fire Service

As we roll into the new year it's a time to look back and reflect on where we have come from and where we are heading. I am happy to say that the state of the South Dakota Fire service is positive. It's always easy to get caught up in the negative but let's take the extra effort to look at the good things happening here. Let's face it, we have had some great talent inside the borders of our state. In the last

few years, we have had Corley Moore in Aberdeen, Rick Laskey and John Sulka spent a weekend in Vermillion, Kyle Romagus, Dr David Griffin, Ljay Geist all have made a stop in Sioux Falls. Across the state names like Shupe, Naum, Reilly, Backer, Merrill, Knapp have all had appearances. Perhaps the most exciting thing happening is the quality of homegrown speakers that are surfacing. These men and women are on the way to making names for themselves and making our state proud. We must give these young influencers a platform

to improve their skills and techniques. We should be giving them the opportunities at district schools and then state fire school, and some will be coming in 2026 so stand by. While the fire service is struggling across the nation to fill its roles, we must stay positive, remember why we are here and be there for each other. The best take away for me from fall conference was Tom Merrill's statement "Nobody wants to join a sinking ship". He was making the point to always look for the good in your department. Stop putting each other down. Lift



Rick George, Central District Director
"Let's face it, we have had some great talent inside the borders of our state. In the last few years, we have had Corley Moore in Aberdeen, Rick Laskey and John Sulka spent a weekend in Vermillion, Kyle Romagus, Dr David Griffin, Ljay Geist all have made a stop in Sioux Falls. Across the state names like Shupe, Naum, Reilly, Backer, Merrill, Knapp have all had appearances. Perhaps the most exciting thing happening is the quality of homegrown speakers that are surfacing."

up those in need. Learn from your mistakes and move forward. 2026 is shaping up to be another great year. I'm looking forward to challenge of self-improvement. Hope to see everyone in Mitchell for the in-

structor's conference as that should also be a top-notch event.
Stay safe, stay positive and stay hungry

RICK GEORGE



Huron crews respond to structure fire

Huron Fire Department responded to a structure fire early in the afternoon of Dec. 2. The fire was quickly knocked down and a search was conducted. No injuries to report. A fast response by Huron PD and Beadle County Emergency Management made many things happen quickly. Huron PD assisted by attempting to knock on the door and get the attention of anyone possibly in the residence as well as completed a walk around. EM arrived quickly and was able to handle some initial command responsibilities ensure accountability was maintained. On top of that we had a great response from our volunteers. All this together made a quick efficient scene. Great to see the collaboration of multiple agencies working together for the best outcome of the community. From the Huron Fire Department Facebook page.



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SDFA AUXILIARY REPORT

Goodbye 2025.....
Welcome 2026.

With that being said that means 2026 SD State Auxiliary dues are due! Being a member of the state auxiliary includes:
-Basic \$10K accidental death and dismemberment (AD&D) insurance.

-10K Line of Duty health & fire related insurance.
Dues are \$25/year per individual. Dues can be paid via Venmo (SDFireAuxiliary), PayPal (southdakotafirefightersauxiliary@gmail.com) or mail in a check with the application below.
As you are enrolling your members this is a good time to update your department roster list to in-

clude personal information, it's very important to make sure this is up to date in case of an emergency.
If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to an auxiliary member.

HOLLY BAUER
SD Auxiliary Vice president

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- To promote friendship
- To counsel local auxiliaries
- To cooperate with the South Dakota Firefighters Association and Annual State Fire School

Contact information:

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- \$10K of Line of Duty Health and AD&D, fire related health incidents, i.e. heart attack, stroke, other.

If you haven't paid your dues, it's not too late!



Fatal residential fire in rural Box Elder claims life

On Sunday, November 23, at 8:51 p.m., firefighters and law enforcement responded to 125 Westgate Road in rural Box Elder due to reports of a residential structure fire. Upon arrival, an active fire was observed at lot 109 with heavy fire and smoke conditions. Following containment efforts by firefighters, a deceased male, 68-year-old Darwin Toof of Box Elder, was discovered inside the residence along with a deceased dog. The cause of the fire remains under investigation by the South Dakota Fire Marshall and Pennington County Sheriff's Office. Pennington County 911, Box Elder Volunteer Fire Department, Box Elder Police Department, Black Hawk Volunteer Fire Department, Rapid City Police Department, Ellsworth Air Force Base Fire Department, Whispering Pines Volunteer Fire Department, Rapid Valley Volunteer Fire Department, the Rapid City Fire Department and Ambulance Service, North Haines Volunteer Fire Department, North Haines Fire Corps, The New Underwood Volunteer Fire Department, Pennington County Sheriff's office, the South Dakota Highway Patrol, Montana Dakota Utilities, West River Electrical Cooperative, the South Dakota Fire Marshalls Office and the Red Cross Serving Central and Western South Dakota. Photo courtesy of the Pennington County Sheriff's Office.









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Moving Past “The Thumb Rule” in HazMat Size-Up and Initial Actions

By KENNY LARSON

The definition of what qualifies as a hazardous materials (HazMat) incident has changed dramatically in recent years—and so has the approach to handling it. We can no longer prepare solely for overturned fuel tankers or leaking shipping containers. Today’s HazMat calls are just as likely to involve chemical suicides, lithium-ion battery fires, or alternative fuel vehicles.

Best practices are evolving almost weekly as new information emerges. While “bread and butter” events like natural gas leaks and gasoline spills still occur, HazMat has moved into our neighborhoods, homes, and workplaces. None of this should deter or overwhelm the local responder because you are still the hero at these scenes, and the tools you already have can make a life-saving difference. After all, no one has ever been saved by a rescuer in a plastic HazMat suit.

BEYOND “THE THUMB RULE”

Most of us were introduced to HazMat awareness through “The Thumb Rule” or “The Donut Hole.” The idea that if you can cover the entire incident with your thumb at arm’s length, you’re far enough away. The instruction was simple: recognize the hazard, call for help, and stay clear.

That’s a sound defensive posture—but it’s not always enough anymore. When hazardous materials make their way into homes, cars, or confined spaces, responders must move past “The Thumb Rule.” We need crews capable of identifying a situation, making a risk-based assessment, and taking calculated actions using the tools already on the rig.

“DUDE, DON’T BREATHE IT”

If there’s one principle that never changes, it’s this: “Dude, don’t breathe it.” It’s not a scare tactic—it’s sound operational advice. A firefighter in full structural gear and SCBA can be a superhero in the initial stages of a HazMat event.

Your SCBA provides protection from most airborne threats long enough to make a safe, targeted rescue. But this isn’t a substitute for training or knowledge—it’s a motivator to learn more. Tools are only as effective as the skills behind them.

THE FAMILIAR LOGIC OF SIZE-UP

At its core, HazMat is still about scene size-up and risk assessment. The questions haven’t changed:

- What’s happening?
 - Who needs help?
 - What will happen if we act—or don’t act?
 - What are the risks, and how can we reduce them?
- HazMat incidents follow the same decision-making process as



For Wednesday, Dec. 3 training night for LeMars Fire Rescue, they took a tour of the Sioux City Fire Rescue’s Regional Hazmat truck, which they brought to LeMars to show to the department. Sioux City Fire Rescue (SCFR) operates a regional hazardous materials (HAZMAT) program using dedicated response vehicles, including a specific truck known as “Hammer 13” (or now referred to as Hazmat 4), and associated trailers. This program covers 12 counties in Iowa. Photo by Brian Nitzschke, department photographer.

house fires, water rescues, or vehicle extrications. That’s why local responders—you—remain the experts in protecting the community. Coordinate with your regional HazMat team, seek refresher or initial training, and talk through “what-if” scenarios with HazMat technicians. You’ll find that many solutions rely on proper size-up, risk-based decisions, and the tools you already know how to use.

THE 3/30 RULE: A PRACTICAL RESCUE GUIDELINE

The 3/30 Rule is one such tool—a guideline to help emergency responders balance life-saving efforts with safety during HazMat rescues. It defines how long a responder can operate in a contaminated area while wearing structural PPE and SCBA:

3-MINUTE RULE: When rescuing unconscious or seizing victims, structural PPE with SCBA provides about three minutes of effective protection. These victims are typically within line of sight or a known area.

30-MINUTE RULE: When rescuing conscious and mobile victims, the same equipment can provide up to thirty minutes of protection, allowing for controlled rescue and evacuation efforts.

This rule does not apply to confined or below-grade spaces, where vapor concentrations can be significantly higher and protection time is drastically reduced. Some situations—such as those involving fluorine-containing gases or

explosive atmospheres—should not be approached until the environment can be changed or mitigated.

The 3/30 Rule isn’t a license to take unnecessary risks—it’s a framework to help you understand what’s possible with the equipment and knowledge you already have.

TOOLS YOU ALREADY OWN

If there’s one theme to take away, it’s that **you already have what you need**. Structural PPE, SCBA, and basic ventilation tools—like a fan to push a vapor cloud away or replace contaminated air—can all make a measurable difference.

And don’t overlook one of the most powerful tools in your pocket: the **cell phone**. Quick communication with your regional HazMat experts can provide critical confirmation and reassurance. Their advice will likely sound familiar: “Dude, don’t breathe it,” and “Remember the 3/30 Rule.”

With those two principles—and the knowledge you already bring to every call—you can move confidently beyond “The Thumb Rule” and make a real impact in your community’s next HazMat emergency.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kenny Larson has served in the Iowa Fire Service for more than 23 years, working in both full-time and combination departments. He currently serves as a District Fire Chief with the Des Moines Fire

Department, overseeing operations on the city’s East Side as part of the 1st Division. Chief Larson is dedicated to advancing practical, safety-driven approaches

to HazMat and fireground operations, focusing on empowering firefighters to make confident, informed decisions in dynamic environments.



Multi-agency crews contain 30-acre grass fire near Rapid City Regional Airport runway

A grass fire ignited near a runway at Rapid City Regional Airport on Nov. 24. The fire was first reported a little after noon, with firefighters responding from several agencies. The blaze spread rapidly and grew to exceed 30 acres in size. The fire burned close to the Black Hills National Forest air tanker base on the east side of the airport and is described as ‘accidental and human caused.’ Agencies responding: Pennington County 911, Rapid Valley Volunteer Fire Department, the Rapid City Fire Department, Box Elder Volunteer Fire Department, Black Hawk Volunteer Fire Department, Ellsworth Air Force Base Fire Department, Battle Creek Fire Department, Rockerville Volunteer Fire Department, the New Underwood Volunteer Fire Department, South Dakota Wildland Fire Pennington County Sheriff’s office and the Rapid City Police Department. Photo courtesy of the KOTA Territory News.



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Fire contained at Reptile Gardens ag shelter; several animals lost

On Nov. 21, the Rockerville Volunteer Fire Department responded to a report of a structure fire, at 8955 South Highway 16, rural Rockerville, unincorporated Pennington County South Dakota, commercially known as "Reptile Gardens." Upon arrival firefighters observed an active fire in a detached agriculture shelter with heavy fire and smoke conditions extending into the ceiling and roof assembly. Rapid attack by firefighters contained the fire to the structure of origin, stopping the spread of the flames to nearby natural vegetation, infrastructure and other improvements. No injuries to firefighters, civilians, were reported. As of the time of this release, an undetermined number of tortoises and alligators perished. Agencies responding: Pennington County 911, Rockerville Volunteer Fire Department, Hill City Volunteer Fire Department, Whispering Pines Volunteer Fire Department, Rapid City Fire Department and Ambulance Service, Battle Creek Fire Department, Pennington County Sheriff's Office, Pennington County Emergency Management, Black Hill Energy, Montana Dakota Utilities, South Dakota Fire Marshalls Office. Photos courtesy of the Rockerville Volunteer Fire Department.

PLATTE VFD HAS FRIDAY ACTION

The Platte Volunteer Fire Department answered a call around 5:40 a.m. last Friday morning for a camper van fire at the Chad and Darla Johnson residence in the southwest part of town near the baseball fields.

A battery charger was hooked to it and crews hooked on to the van and pulled it away from the house but it was a total loss.

Yankton training night

Yankton firefighters Charlie Stephenson and Mike Fitzgerald practice removing a victim from a window with parallel ladders during a Nov. 25 training night by Yankton Volunteer Fire Department. From the Yankton Volunteer Fire Department Facebook page.

Grain bin fire reported west of White

Occurred: November 30, 2025, at 8:40 a.m. Location: SD Highway 30 and 475th Avenue, White, SD White, S.D. _ At approximately 8:40 a.m. on Sunday, November 30, 2025, the White Fire Department and the Brookings County Sheriff's Office responded to a reported grain bin fire near SD Highway 30 and 475th Avenue, west of White.

Upon arrival, first responders observed smoke coming from the vents of the grain bin. Crews worked to extinguish an active fire located near the fan inlet at the base of the bin. During efforts to expose and suppress the fire, the corn inside was removed. Preliminary information suggests that an equipment failure may have ignited the corn near the bottom of the structure.

Approximately 6,000 bushels of corn, valued at an estimated \$20,000, were inside the bin at

the time of the incident. Damage to the grain bin and associated equipment is estimated at \$15,000. Crews remained on scene for just over an hour.

The incident remains under investigation by the Brookings County Sheriff's Office.

Agencies Involved: Brookings County Sheriff's Office and the White Fire Department.

Anyone with any information about this case can contact the Brookings County Sheriff's Office at 605-696-8300 or contact Crimestoppers anonymously by visiting www.brookingsareacrimestoppers.com or by calling 605-692-STOP (7867).

Release information provided by David D. Biteler Assistant Sheriff Brookings County Sheriff's Office.

(White Tri-City Star, White, December 4, 2025)

WATERTOWN FIRE RESCUE ASSISTS IN EXTRICATION

Watertown Fire Rescue responded to an ambulance intercept request for a complex vehicle extrication involving half-ton pickup that had rolled onto its side and was leaning over a bridge. A bridge beam had penetrated the passenger compartment, trapping the driver along with several structural components of the vehicle.

The Ambulance and Fire Engine were dispatched to assist the Estelline Fire Department with extrication operations and patient-

care. Performance Towing provided critical support by stabilizing the pickup during the rescue. The Deuel County Sheriff's Office, a deputy, and the South Dakota Highway Patrol assisted with traffic control throughout the incident. The patient was successfully extricated from the vehicle and transported to Prairie Lakes Hospital with serious but non-life-threatening injuries.

(South Shore Gazette, South Shore, December 3, 2025)





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Pistols and Pulaskis Blood Drive held in Rapid City

Thank you, donors! Community response nearly doubled expectations at the inaugural Pistols and Pulaskis Blood Drive in Rapid City on November 21. "What an incredible event-49 lifesaving units of blood collected for area patients," said Aubrey Oyler, event coordinator for Vitalant Blood Donation. Oyler says "The teamwork between the Highway Patrol and Wildland Fire crews was nothing short of inspiring for us all." The goal was 27 units of blood, making the outcome of 49 units even more heart-warming. SD Wildland Fire won the traveling trophy vs. SD Highway Patrol by receiving the most donations on their behalf but the real winner is the community. Lives will be saved because of blood donors generosity. The event was timed to help fill a vital need at a crucial time of year. Blood donations usually drop about 25 percent between Thanksgiving and New Years while the need for blood remains steady. After a successful launch, the friendly blood donation competition between SDWF and SDHP is expected to be an annual pre-holiday event. We hope to see you next November for the 2nd annual Pistols and Pulaskis blood drive!



Mitchell's Poet plant donates radios to Mount Vernon Fire Department

POET Bioprocessing – Mitchell donated 10 radios to the Mount Vernon Fire Department. The donated radios will replace older equipment and ensure firefighters have clear, reliable communication during emergencies. "Safety is at the core of everything we do at POET," said Kel-

ly Kjelden, General Manager of POET Bioprocessing – Mitchell. "Our team is proud to support the Mount Vernon Fire Department with equipment that helps protect the community we're proud to call home." The donation reflects POET's commitment to rural communities

and the essential services that support them. POET assists local fire departments in purchasing the gear their teams need to serve the community and keep firefighters safe. (Mitchell Daily Republic, Mitchell, December 6, 2025)

Flames put out behind new Watertown restaurant

"We are truly the hottest place in town!" the owners of The Local, a new restaurant in Watertown announced on Thursday on their Facebook page. At mid-day Dec. 4, Watertown Fire Rescue responded to 16 Kemp Ave. W. for a fire behind The Local restaurant, Watertown Fire Rescue reported. Upon arrival, WFR stated, fire crews found fire on the patio area immediately behind the downtown structure. The fire had spread to the second level of the patio and up the exterior wall of the building

Watertown firefighters put the fire out quickly while another crew of firefighters searched and evacuated the restaurant, the adjacent Harry's salon and the residential dwellings above the businesses, according to WFR. Although smoke had entered the building, flames had not, WFR reported. Crews were on scene for approximately one hour looking for any hot spots and ventilating the building. The Local reported the restaurant was fine.

"We just want to let everyone know that The Local is just fine. We only have a little smoke damage," the restaurant said on Facebook. "The fire was contained to the patio." The Local thanked WFR on its Facebook page. Engine 4, Engine 3, Medic 4 and Battalion 1 initially responded to the incident. The cause of the fire is under investigation, WFR reported. No injuries were reported. (Watertown Public Opinion, Watertown, December 9, 2025)



Rural Yankton home lost in fire; occupant displaced, no injuries reported

One man is displaced after a structure fire completely destroyed a home east of Yankton Sunday night, Dec. 7. According to Yankton Fire Chief Tim Linke, dispatch was called shortly after 5 p.m. for a house fire approximately one mile east of the WNAX radio towers on 308th Avenue.

"When I arrived, there were flames coming out of the roof and all the windows," Linke said. "The structure was too far gone so, after consulting with the resident, it was just too much risk and it turned into a controlled demolition." Weather conditions didn't help, according to Linke.

"We all know what the weather and the road conditions are right now," he said. "The snow had just started up again, the roads were icing and the structure was located in a rural area that's sometimes a challenge just getting there in time, especially if you don't notice the fire until you actually have flames coming out of the roof." The occupant wasn't home at the time of the fire. Linke said it was called in from a bystander.

"Knowing the location and the weather conditions, I contacted dispatch and had them call Gayville for mutual aid right away. I asked for an engine and a tanker from Gayville and tankers from Volin because I knew we'd need water."

When Linke arrived at the scene, he connected with the brother of the occupant to make sure no one was inside.

"Once we knew no one was in danger, we commenced a fire attack," he said. "We attempted to fight the fire defensively for a



while, and that included using the dump tank, which is basically a portable swimming pool that we dump water into and it shuttles water in. We also called Vermillion but ended up not using them. We fought the fire for a while, but there was no headway.

"We spoke with the home-

owner and tried to determine if there's anything we needed to be concerned about in regard to the cause of the fire," Linke said. "We didn't find anything, so the cause will be undetermined. The homeowner was okay with us backing off and letting it go. It got to the point where we were making more

ice than we were putting out fire because it was just so far gone."

The temperature at the Yankton airport at the time the fire was reported was 16 degrees, with light snow and mist falling.

Linke said he also spoke with the State Fire Marshall and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) which is a customary practice for these types of events.

"They also concurred that there wasn't going to be a need for doing an extensive investigation just because of the amount of damage already done by the time we got there," he said.

Linke said there were no injuries

to anyone on his crew or any civilians.

He thanked other agencies who provided crucial support such as the Yankton County Sheriff's Office, Yankton County Emergency Management, Yankton County Emergency Medical Services, Yankton County dispatchers and the other departments that aided in the call.

Also, the Yankton Fire Department Auxiliary brought hot coffee and warm food as the firefighters were on the scene for close to four hours.

Photos from Gayville Fire Chief David Rabe.



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