



MnFIRE

2025 Annual Report



From the President

Dear fire service members, families and friends,

Having built a career in the Minnesota fire service, I have witnessed firsthand the physical and emotional toll that a firefighter can endure. And I know things can be better – for our current firefighters and for future generations.

In 2025, I retired as Richfield Fire Chief and moved into the volunteer role of Board President at MnFIRE. As a co-founder of the organization, I'm proud of how far we've come, and I'm honored to lead this organization into our next chapter.

Two fire service leaders have been right alongside me from the very beginning – George Esbensen and John Wolff. As co-founders of MnFIRE and officers of our board, these two men have made an extraordinary impact on Minnesota's fire service. Their vision, advocacy and unwavering commitment to improve health outcomes for Minnesota's firefighters have changed – and even saved – lives. This year, as they both retire from their board positions, we recognize their contributions with admiration and gratitude.

Additionally, I would like to thank former Executive Director Rebecca Otto for her service to the MnFIRE mission and wish her well in her future endeavors.

Thank you to legislators and donors who continue to support our mission to improve firefighter health outcomes across the state. Your partnership is helping us deliver vital physical and mental health resources to Minnesota's 20,000 firefighters and their families, including the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program and our crisis response team's efforts that we are now seeing a higher demand for.

As we look ahead to 2026, MnFIRE's 10-year anniversary, we are fueled by the progress we have made and the countless firefighters we've reached. Thanks to MnFIRE, this year, more than 150 firefighters received much-needed financial support as they handled diagnoses of occupational cancer, PTSD and other critical illnesses. Hundreds of firefighters were able to see a mental health professional through our program. And thousands of firefighters received crucial education and training around protecting their health in the fire service.

Every day these numbers climb, because firefighters are getting the resources they deserve. That's more lives impacted than we could have hoped for just ten years ago – and we're far from done.

Together, we are shaping a future where the next generation joins a fire service that is healthier, safer and improved compared to what we inherited. For those currently in the field, we are committed to offering the best practices for your health and well-being.

Thank you for your ongoing support of MnFIRE and the Minnesota fire service!



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mike Dobesh".

Mike Dobesh
MnFIRE President & Co-founder

MnFIRE Board of Directors

Mike Dobesh, President

Retired Fire Chief,
Richfield Fire Department

Amber Lage, Vice President

Deputy Chief of EMS,
Minneapolis Fire Department

Ed Hoffman, Treasurer

Fire Chief,
Owatonna Fire Department

Ken Bence, Secretary

Retired Battalion Chief,
Golden Valley Fire Department

Scott Vadnais

Lieutenant,
Edina Fire Department

George Esbensen

Retired Fire Chief,
Eden Prairie Fire Department

John Wolff

Retired Deputy Fire Chief,
St. Louis Park Fire Department

MnFIRE Staff

DeeDee Jankovich

Interim Executive Director

In October 2025, MnFIRE co-founder and former President George Esbensen was named to the “2025 Notable Nonprofit Board Members” list by Twin Cities Business.

George has created a tidal wave of change within the Minnesota firefighter community, as a longtime fire chief in Eden Prairie, and as co-founder and President of MnFIRE.

During his tenure, George rallied the state’s fire service to persuade the state legislature in 2021 to pass the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program, the most comprehensive firefighter well-being legislation in the nation.

Congratulations, George, on this well-deserved recognition!



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“His passion for helping fellow firefighters is unmatched, and his leadership has enabled MnFIRE to grow, reach and improve the lives of thousands of Minnesota firefighters and their loved ones.”

Mike Dobesh

MnFIRE PRESIDENT & CO-FOUNDER

Supporting Minnesota's Fire Service

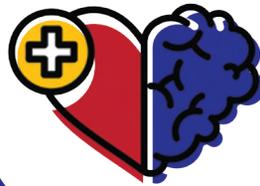
Minnesota firefighters work tirelessly to keep our communities safe, but they're significantly affected by serious health conditions including cardiac disease, emotional trauma and cancer at rates higher than the general public. And because more than 90% of Minnesota's fire service is volunteer or non-career, many firefighters don't have access to health and wellness benefits through their department. But there is hope thanks to the Hometown Heroes Assistance Program.

This program ensures every Minnesota firefighter has access to the resources needed to better their physical and emotional health. Administered by the Minnesota Firefighter Initiative and funded through a grant from the state of Minnesota, this comprehensive firefighter well-being program combines the following vital resources for all active volunteer, paid-on-call, part-time and full-time Minnesota firefighters at no cost.



Critical Illness Program

A critical illness insurance policy which covers diagnoses of critical illnesses such as a heart attack, cancer or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and provides a lump-sum cash payment up to \$20,000 per diagnosis to assist firefighters with expenses.



Counseling & Peer Support

Confidential help and mental health resources available 24/7. Firefighters and their family members can access up to five no-cost counseling visits per issue per year with MnFIRE's network of trauma-informed mental health providers, as well as peer support from trained and trusted peers.



Health & Wellness Training

Health and wellness training provided at no cost to fire departments on topics including emotional wellness, cancer, cardiac health, sleep, fitness, nutrition and more so firefighters can learn about increased occupational health risks and best strategies for staying healthy and safe.



Critical Resources for Firefighters Statewide

Critical Illness Program

159

CLAIMS PAID IN 2025

\$1,382,250

TOTAL PAID IN 2025

MOST FREQUENTLY COVERED CONDITIONS IN 2025

- 1 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- 2 Cancer
- 3 Heart Attack

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“I applied for the critical illness benefit after being diagnosed with prostate cancer. The process was very simple and it took less than a week to receive my benefit.”

Minnesota Firefighter



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“It was one phone call, one form that I sent in. And a few weeks later, I received a check in the mail... It’s an amazing program. I don’t know how else I can say it. MnFIRE probably saved my home.”

Eric Coen
STACY-LENT FIRE DEPARTMENT

Volunteer firefighter Eric Coen was incredibly stressed when he was diagnosed with throat cancer in 2024. Eric knew he was in for a demanding journey and needed to be fully focused on his treatment, so he stepped away from his day job. Thankfully, he was able to lean on the critical illness benefit – and he says applying for it was the easiest part of his cancer journey. Scan the QR code to read more.



MnFIRE Assistance Program

No-cost counseling visits

1,573

TRAUMA-INFORMED
PROVIDERS AVAILABLE

1,056

COUSLING
VISITS IN 2025

TOP PRESENTING ISSUES IN 2025

- 1 Anxiety & Worry
- 2 Post-Traumatic Stress
- 3 Workplace Issues & Job Stress

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“It’s a huge reassurance that MnFIRE is a place for us to go if we are going through something in life – related to a call or not.”

Chief David Van Batavia
LIVERNE FIRE DEPARTMENT



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“Admitting that you need help with some things, or that some things truly are horrible and you need a way to work through them... that doesn’t take away from your strength and competence on the job. If anything, it has made me a better firefighter, a better crew member.”

Tracy Terbell
MINNEAPOLIS FIRE DEPARTMENT

After using MnFIRE’s confidential helpline to receive her five no-cost therapy visits, Tracy Terbell credits MnFIRE and her therapist – who she still works with today – for her newfound resilience and the tools she’s equipped to use when times are tough. Scan the QR code to read Tracy’s impactful story.



Peer Support

167

PEER SUPPORT
CALLS IN 2025

For a firefighter who is struggling, getting help from someone who has lived similar experiences can make all the difference. MnFIRE Peer Support provides confidential support to those experiencing personal, emotional or work-related problems, while acting as a bridge to outside professional services.

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“The most valuable component of the program is connection. MnFIRE connects a struggling firefighter or their family member with someone who truly understands the unique stresses of the job and listens without judgment. Having a shared experience builds trust and reminds firefighters they are not alone.”

Mandee Marx | MnFIRE Peer Supporter
ROCHESTER FIRE DEPARTMENT

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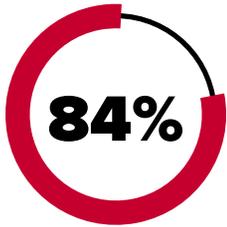
“The amount of time that I spend supporting someone can greatly vary depending on the individual’s needs and healing process. When I don’t get a text or a call for a while, that’s often a sign someone is on the right path and no longer needs my support – and that’s a great feeling. If I can help save one firefighter – it’s 100% worth it.”

Cory DeWitte | MnFIRE Peer Supporter
MONTROSE FIRE DEPARTMENT

Scan the QR code to meet Cory DeWitte, a Captain in the Montrose Fire Department and one of our MnFIRE peer supporters.



MnFIRE Training



OF MINNESOTA FIRE DEPARTMENTS TRAINED SINCE INCEPTION

186

TRAININGS IN 2025

HEALTH & WELLNESS TRAININGS OFFERED

- MnFIRE Awareness
- Emotional Wellness
- Cardiac Health
- Cancer
- Sleep
- Fitness & Nutrition

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“We want healthy firefighters so they can go home to their families.”

Chief Jeff Laskowske
ALBERT LEA FIRE DEPARTMENT



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“It seems cliché, but you don’t know what you don’t know. And I think that bringing in MnFIRE, who is literally setting the trend on firefighter health and wellness for our nation, is such a great opportunity. These trainings will change your career and all of the aspects of your life because you will have a greater understanding of how to live.”

Zach Yurczyk | MnFIRE Trainer
VIRGINIA FIRE DEPARTMENT



Firefighter Health Forum

The 2025 Firefighter Health Forum brought together Minnesota firefighters and their partners/spouses for powerful speakers, critical discussions and actionable sessions focused on health and well-being.

Attendees engaged with specialized sessions on mental and physical health topics important for firefighters, including resilience, hydration, nutrition, sleep and more.



“The speakers provide excellent information that is beneficial to all ranks in the fire service.”

**Attendee
FIREFIGHTER HEALTH FORUM**



Miles for MnFIRE

Two Minnesota firefighters, Doug Foote and Kyle Bode, walked more than 150 miles from Duluth to St. Paul in September 2025, to raise awareness and funds for MnFIRE. The team started the “Miles for MnFIRE” journey in downtown Duluth and concluded the nine-day walk at the Fallen Firefighter Memorial on the grounds of the State Capitol.

Doug is a firefighter with Excelsior Fire District and founder of Miles for MnFIRE, having walked nearly 200 miles from Marietta to St. Paul in 2021. In 2025, he was joined by Kyle, a St. Paul firefighter and MnFIRE peer supporter. After nine days on state trails, highways and roads, they crossed the finish line to a cheering crowd of fellow firefighters,

family, friends and media. The walk raised over \$50,000 for MnFIRE’s critical services and was covered by media across the state.

Along the way, Doug and Kyle visited several communities that welcomed them with open arms and even walked alongside them, including Duluth, Esko, Carlton, Mahtowa, Barnum, Moose Lake, Sturgeon Lake, Willow River, Rutledge, Finlayson, Groningen, Mission Creek, Pine City, Rock Creek, Rush City, Harris, North Branch, Stacy, Wyoming, Forest Lake, Hugo, White Bear Lake, Vadnais Heights, Little Canada and St. Paul.



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“My only ask of all you firefighters is please, you’ve got to take care of yourselves. We can’t be another statistic. We cannot. Please use MnFIRE. Please use each other. Because if not us, who?”

Doug Foote
MILES FOR MnFIRE FOUNDER



Crisis Response

MnFIRE continues to meet the growing demand for crisis response for fire departments across the state experiencing critical incidents. Our specialized crisis response team assists firefighters after an especially traumatic call, such as the loss of a small child or a fellow firefighter. Our team responded to 26 requests for support in 2025, up from 17 in 2024.

This “boots-on-the-ground” crew of mental health professionals provides immediate emotional support, guidance and space for firefighters to process the stress that can follow these types of events, ensuring that the firefighters who serve our communities are supported with the same care and urgency they provide others.

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“After one recent debriefing, we received a note of gratitude from an attendee, saying the session continues to have a positive impact well after our time together. That’s the goal.”

**Rochelle Hawthorne,
MnFIRE Peer Support Program Manager**



MnFIRE Honored by MNICS

MnFIRE, along with MnFIRE’s mental health partner PRO Network, was honored to receive the Partnership Award in 2025 from the Minnesota Incident Command System (MNICS), an interagency group of state and federal partners that cooperate to manage wildfire and all-risk incidents.

The Partnership Award acknowledged MnFIRE’s exemplary response, in partnership with PRO Network, during the September 26 line of duty death of wildland firefighter Isabella “Bella” Oscarson, supporting both her family and the Minnesota wildland fire community.

The award was presented to MnFIRE President Mike Dobesh at the MNICS Conference in Duluth in December 2025.



Envisioning a Brighter Future for Firefighters

In October 2025, the MnFIRE board completed a strategic plan to prioritize:

- Creating an advisory board
- Expanding outreach and visibility across Minnesota
- Defining and implementing retiree benefits
- Enhancing collaboration with fire service associations and partners

Looking ahead, we're also excited to tackle the following in 2026 and beyond:

- Continuing to explore evidence-based approaches to improve health outcomes and longevity of firefighters in Minnesota
- Deploying critical response teams to departments across the state as needed
- Embarking on a statewide grassroots communications campaign to reach all firefighters about their Hometown Heroes Assistance Program benefits

MnFIRE



888-784-6634

mnfirehealth.org



The Minnesota Firefighter Initiative is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit recognized by the IRS. Tax/EIN number: 38-4049248.