

## **Firefighter Boots at the Capitol**

### **Division A: Public Relations Programs**

#### **8A. Public Affairs**

##### **ENTRY**

##### **Research/Situation Analysis**

The International Association of Firefighters released information that in 2018 70% of firefighter line-of-duty deaths were cancer related. The Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami has been studying cancer rates among firefighters since 2015 through an appropriation by the Florida Legislature and their research was clear, 2 out of 3 firefighters will be diagnosed with cancer because of our occupational exposures. As firefighters we accept this is a dangerous job but even with the science showing cancer as an occupational exposure the State of Florida did not recognize cancer as an occupational disease. When a Florida firefighter was diagnosed there were no benefits extended to us or our family members and if we died, there were no survivor benefits for the family we left behind.

##### **Planning**

In the beginning of the 2019 Legislative session 42 States had enacted legislation providing some level of cancer coverage their firefighters. Florida was not one of those states. Bills had been filed in previous years but always stalled on the House side. Our goal was simple; we needed the bill to be placed on an agenda for a House committee. Note I didn't say to get the bill passed, we had been told the Speaker of the House would not let the bill move; all we wanted was to be placed on an agenda a step further than we had been in the previous two decades.

How had other States passed their legislation? What tactics had they put to use that was the most successful? One state had a bag piper play outside of the Chambers and every time the Legislators would enter the piper would be playing Amazing Grace. Another State coordinated firefighters in uniform to be seated in the gallery for every committee meeting and general session. These types of events would be tough to coordinate for Florida because we are so geographically large and spread out and fiscal demographics were from volunteer fire departments across North Florida to the large Metropolitan Fire Departments like Miami Dade. How could we include everyone? Then we saw it, another State placed firefighter boots on the steps of their State Capitol and we knew that was our answer.

##### **Implementation**

We needed the Legislators to see and feel how this disease has impacted our profession. We decided to take the boots on the steps of the Capitol to the next level and develop place cards for each pair of boots. Each card included the name of the firefighter, a picture of the firefighter, the fire department they represented, their rank, the cancer they been diagnosed with and whether or not they were still fighting or we were honoring their memory. The place cards were to be placed in each pair of boots so the Legislators would know those boots represented a firefighter at one time. We obtained the proper permits for the use of the Capitol Courtyard and the Capitol Plaza Rotunda for the March 7, 2019, the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the legislative session. The timing was very important because in order to impact the legislative process we needed to be early in the session. The Florida Legislature only meets as a body once a year and "Session" is only 60 days long. If we went too far into the legislative session our chances of success diminished considerably.

We reviewed the layout of the Capitol and designed a plan that would require at least 500 pairs of firefighter boots. The boots would be strategically placed so that on the morning of March 7<sup>th</sup> the Legislators would have to walk among our

brothers and sisters to enter their offices. The line we used with the media is “the legislators will have to walk through our graveyard to get to their offices today.” We worked with Miami Dade Fire Dept. who had lost several members to occupational cancer and had designed memorials to their fallen that included their turnout coat, boots and helmet along with their nametag and date of death displayed on mannequin hanger. The plan was to display these in the Rotunda inside the Capitol building and for each Legislator who co-sponsored the bill a “firefighter guardian angel” would be delivered to their office in the Capitol.

## **Evaluation**

The results from this event were beyond anything we could have imaged. We utilized social media and earned media to magnify our message. Each day leading up to the event we wrote up a messages of the day and shared them via social media and email. The messages were targeted specifically to legislators in an attempt to apply pressure to allow the bill to be heard in committee. Each day was a call to action and we made it easy providing the phone numbers to call, the emails to send including sound bites and scripts We provided press releases for local fire departments, unions, individuals and organizations to edit and use as their own. We coached firefighters that had been diagnosed with the disease on how to tell their story to the media and their legislators. The day of the event was emotionally charged, there were firefighters, widows, children of firefighters who traveled from all over the State to be on the steps of the Capitol that day. Our event had provided a platform for the family members of fallen firefighters to tell the story of their loved ones. They shared stories with the legislators who walked through the display; we spoke to media outlet after media outlet after media outlet. The buzz we had created was undeniable. When we started that day at 0600 our House bill had 24 co-sponsors, within a few days the number grew to over 60 which is more than ½ the members of the Florida House and on April 17<sup>th</sup> the bill was fast tracked by the Speaker of the House, placed on the agenda for its first committee meeting and passed unanimously. The bill then went directly to the floor of the House and April 25<sup>th</sup> was unanimously passed in one of the most emotionally charged votes I have ever witnessed. Governor Ron DeSantis signed the bill into law on May 3, 2019 making Florida the 47<sup>th</sup> State to pass Cancer coverage for its firefighters. Our goals were not only met they were exceeded. We had done everything a public relation campaign was meant to; we inspired people to act, effected change and helped pass a law that impacted 40,000 Florida firefighters and their families. And we did it with very little money but a lot of tears, a few curse words and an immense of passion and patience.

## **Budget**

Permits for the use of the Capitol property	No Charge
500 Sets of Firefighter Boots	No cost (they were donated by a vendor and firefighters from across the State brought their own to display
Place cards for the boots	Donated by Arthur Printing
Signs placed around the courtyard	\$350.00
Travel cost	\$250.00
Facebook Geo fencing ads	\$500.00

The signs were paid for by North Collier Professional Firefighters Local 2297. The travel cost was borne by the individuals. The Facebook Ads were paid for by the Florida Professional Firefighters.