

January 30, 2004

Chief Ernie Mitchell, President
International Association of Fire Chiefs
4025 Fair Ridge Dr., Suite 300
Fairfax, VA 22033-2868

Dear Chief Mitchell:

The National Association for Search and Rescue, NASAR, strongly urges the IAFC to form a committee for a problem with which both our memberships have to deal -- Water Rescue.

According to the Centers for Disease Control in 1999, the last year statistics were available, 3,529 Americans lost their lives to drowning. An additional 7,940 citizens were hospitalized for near drowning. Drowning is the 10th leading cause of accidental death in America.

These are tragic numbers and a closer look reveals additional sobering findings. One third of all those drowning victims are would-be rescuers. In 1999, during the tidal surge flooding of Hurricane Floyd, one out of every ten fatalities was a rescuer or would-be rescuer.

Water rescue takes on many forms. It can be swift water rescue for fast moving streams, creeks or rivers. It can be flood rescue when those same waterways or coastal zones are inundated with too much water too quickly by rains, snow melt or hurricane tidal surges. It can take the form of dive rescue, open water rescue, ice rescue or surf rescue. While each of these involves the commonality of water, each is unique and though a member or department is proficient in one aspect of water rescue, it does not follow that they can handle all aspects. The same applies for officers, chief officers and emergency managers.

Thus we end up with many well-intentioned would-be rescuers tragically losing their lives. Fortunately, in 2003, no firefighters lost their lives due to drowning. But this year was an exception. Furthermore, NFPA has stated that a firefighter is four times more likely to lose his or her life in a water rescue situation than fighting a fire.

Why is this? Today's firefighters and their chief officers are better trained and equipped to fight a fire than they are for many water rescue situations.

It is to this end that NASAR advocates that the IAFC form a Water Rescue committee with representatives from the various water rescue disciplines that your member departments face. Much like with the other IAFC Committees, it is hoped that an IAFC Water Rescue Committee would help standardize and disseminate information on safe water practices, water rescue & response standard operating procedures, and possibly provide guidelines for chief officers who have the responsibility to oversee or command such events.

We at NASAR stand willing to support and assist this committee in any way possible. Thank you for your consideration... "that others may live".

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Randy Servis".

Randy Servis, President