



Portsmouth Invests in Critical Fire Department Safety Equipment

For Immediate Release

Media Contact:

Sharon R. Hoggard
Marketing, Communications & Tourism
757-393-5143
hoggards@portsmouthva.gov

(PORTSMOUTH, VA – January 11, 2018) – The [Portsmouth City Council](#) approved \$358,000 for the purchase of a second set of turnout gear for firefighters during its regularly scheduled council meeting Tues., January 9. The second set of turnout gear will help firefighters improve self-decontamination after being exposed to carcinogens in the line of duty. Two hundred suits will be purchased through this appropriation and another 40 suits will be purchased via grant.*

“We are facing a cancer epidemic industry-wide and council’s investment in the second set turnout gear will help us to greatly reduce the risk to firefighters being exposed to carcinogenic materials,” said James Hoffler, chief of the Portsmouth Fire Department. “Portsmouth is now one of the few cities in the Hampton Roads region to utilize this type of equipment.” The fire department plans to purchase new second gear suits yearly so that each firefighter will have two suits initially. In the department’s plan, older suits will routinely be replaced.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and the [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#), firefighters in a 2010 study exhibited greater numbers of cancer diagnoses and cancer-related deaths. The study was completed in late 2015, and indicated that the most prevalent cancers in the 30,000 firefighters studied were digestive, oral, respiratory and urinary cancers. The CDC and NIOSH study also showed that about twice as many firefighters developed malignant mesothelioma, a rare type of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. Firefighters are exposed to high levels of carcinogens in fire suppression because homes and business typically have a lot of plastics and other materials that release harmful substances when burning. Having a clean second set of turnout gear available provides an increased level of protection for firefighters so that they do not re-expose themselves to harmful chemicals by reusing a fire protection suit recently worn.

In addition, the City Council’s total appropriation to the fire department also provides upgrades to the city’s biomedical equipment including:

- 25 Automatic External Defibrillators (AED machines)
- 12 Life Pack 15 machines
- 7 Mechanical Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) machines

Each fire station will also receive upgraded gear/equipment storage lockers.

***Editor’s Note:** Following is the justification for the capital improvement request from the Portsmouth Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services Department

Justification: In an effort to provide the citizens of Portsmouth and Fire Department employees a better level of protection against the cancer epidemic facing our industry, PFRES recommends all firefighters be outfitted with a second set of turnout gear immediately thus requiring the upgrades of gear storage lockers. These lockers will help accommodate the manufactures recommended storage. This will help protect the investment.

Research is indicating that fire fighters are exposed multiple times a day to harmful carcinogens. Currently, our personnel may fight a house fire on any given day of their three-day shift, and typically have to wait until their four-day break to wash the carcinogen saturated gear. This is due to the down time it takes to wash their set of gear, as well as not wanting to have to wear wet gear for the rest of the shift. Current NFPA regulations, and gear manufacturer recommendations, suggest wet gear not be worn during structural firefighting operations. So here is the catch twenty two! Firefighters want clean gear, but also know they cannot fight fire in wet gear. So every time after fighting a house fire, and in between a firefighter's ability to wash the gear, they are being repeatedly exposed to cancer causing carcinogens from that original house fire. From 2002 to 2016, 61 percent of all line of duty deaths for fire fighters has been attributed to cancer. Early research for 2017 indicates that number is rising to a staggering 70 percent. Although fire fighters still die from fires, it is becoming increasingly clear that the repeated exposure to the harmful carcinogens is the main reason.

Besides the immediate impact on the health and safety of fire department employees, this project will limit exposure to harmful carcinogens to the general public that we serve. For example, fire fighters are often called upon to attend public outings where many citizens want to see and get into fire engines. Due to the nature of our profession, often times we wear our turnout gear on certain types of incidents, such as, house fires, car fires, trash fires, and accidents with injuries. Our gear becomes saturated with harmful carcinogens and other blood borne pathogens, which in turn becomes second handedly transmitted to our apparatus and seats. Children often times want to sit in the same seats as fire fighters, thus becoming exposed to harmful carcinogens unintentionally. If fire fighters had a second set of turnout gear, standard operating procedures could change, which would require all fire fighters to gross decontaminate their gear at the incident scene, and isolate contaminated gear prior to entering the cab of the apparatus for the return trip back to the station. Once back at the station, fire fighters will be able to decontaminate themselves, wash the dirty turnout gear, and then be able to resume their normal job functions with a clean, dry set of turnout gear.

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