

# FIRE WATCH

## THE VRFA RESPONSE TO COVID-19

In early March, the Valley Regional Fire Authority (VRFA) along with other fire agencies in King County worked closely with Public Health and King County Emergency Medical Services to monitor the outbreak of COVID 19. The VRFA quickly put plans in place to protect all staff and the citizens we serve.



VRFA crews began wearing a higher level of personal protective equipment (PPE) to include gloves, gowns, glasses and masks when responding to emergencies where COVID-19 was suspected. Dispatchers asked 9-1-1 callers more specific questions; to allow responding firefighters to be fully informed when arriving at a scene and don the necessary PPE. Public Information Officers from all fire agencies in King County collaborated on COVID-19 messaging to ensure all citizens receive the same information.

As COVID-19 cases continued to rise in Western Washington and social distancing was encouraged, the VRFA took more steps to eliminate the chance of exposure by limiting public education activities and business inspections. When the Governor put a stay at home order in place, the VRFA closed public access to fire stations and canceled training or moved it online. Administrative staff began working from home on a rotating basis to accomplish social distancing goals while maintaining the same level of support and services to VRFA firefighters and the community.

To further protect staff, VRFA members enter each fire station through a single point of entry and are screened for COVID-19 symptoms. If feeling ill or experiencing any of the COVID-19 symptoms, VRFA staff are strongly encouraged to stay at home. All staff take extra steps to thoroughly clean workspaces and common areas. The VRFA recommends and encourages all staff to wear masks in the fire station and to practice social distancing whenever possible.

The VRFA put an additional aid car, known as the “Clean Car,” into service on April 3. The Clean Car is staffed by four firefighters working two at a time, on 48-hour shifts over a two-week rotation. This crew is housed at a location separate from the VRFA’s five fire stations to keep them



isolated, reducing the risk of exposure to other VRFA staff. The Clean Car is requested on calls where a patient has a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19. Command staff continuously evaluates the number of calls the Clean Car is dispatched to each week and will use that information to determine when it should be taken out of service.

Below, a firefighter reflects on his two-week experience on the Clean Car:

*It may sound odd, but working on the Clean Car made us feel confident and calm during this unprecedented time. At the beginning of this crisis, we all felt a great deal of uncertainty around what would be the best way to tackle this new challenge. The isolation of the Clean Car gave us a platform where we could take a step back, think things through calmly, and then start developing an innovative and systematic approach to providing aid to our most vulnerable patients. As we focused on only COVID-19 related calls, other VRFA members directed their attention to the daily emergent needs of our community with the assurance they had us as a resource.*

*Each day assigned to the Clean Car involved a constant effort to decontaminate everything around us. We started every shift with a thorough rig check, making sure personal protective equipment (PPE) was clean, our entire vehicle was decontaminated, and our cleaning equipment was ready. After every call, we would repeat that process using a variety of tools, my favorite being a repurposed household paint sprayer. It did a great job generating a mist of 80% ethanol liquid that could quickly fill in every crack and crevice in the aid car. We were constantly wiping down all the surfaces in our quarters with bleach or other disinfectants and doing a full station cleaning at least once*

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*a shift. All the cleaning may have seemed redundant at times, but it made us feel confident that we were doing our best to eliminate any germs or viruses.*

*Though we were in direct contact with COVID-19 positive patients, it was reassuring to have several layers of PPE, including a face shield, goggles, an airtight mask, overalls, disposable gown and two pairs of gloves. It took some practice to become efficient at donning and doffing all of the PPE. Removing PPE is a slow and deliberate process, requiring additional gloves and hand sanitizer breaks in between each step. To reduce our time out of service, we would keep two sets of equipment ready to go at all times.*

*Overall, my Clean Car experience was extremely rewarding. I felt I used all of my skills, knowledge and ingenuity to help our community through a time of hardship. The lessons learned from this experience will serve us well as we move forward and face new challenges.*

As we continue to navigate this new world with COVID-19, the VRFA will follow best practices to keep our firefighters and staff safe and healthy so that we can continue to provide our community with the highest level of service. We thank all of you for staying home so that we could be here for you. For more information and ongoing updates on COVID-19 in King County please visit:

[www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/communicable-diseases/disease-control/novel-coronavirus.aspx](http://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/communicable-diseases/disease-control/novel-coronavirus.aspx)

## VRFA VULNERABLE POPULATIONS PROGRAM EXPANDS, CHANGES NAME

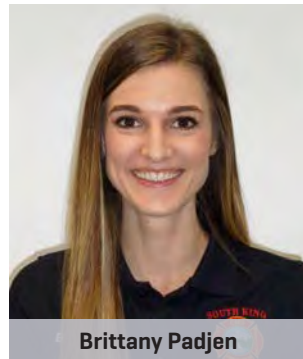
In past issues of the Fire Watch, the Community Medical Technician (CMT) program was introduced and explained. The CMT program is an outgrowth of the Affordable Care Act, providing patient-centered healthcare using mobile resources outside of the normal healthcare environment. This program is designed to better meet the needs of vulnerable populations. The CMT program connects people to appropriate medical and mental health care services to reduce non-emergency 9-1-1 calls, medical spending, and emergency room visits. This properly directed care achieves better health outcomes for patients while relieving strain on the emergency medical system.

Several different approaches to mobile integrated healthcare (MIH) exist throughout King County. The VRFA and South King Fire & Rescue (SKFR) joined forces to create a model using a combination Firefighter/Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT's) and Social Workers. This team responds to non-emergency 9-1-1 calls and to referrals from VRFA or SKFR staff. The team partners with local hospitals, community mental health clinics, substance treatment centers, food banks, senior centers, and more to ensure wrap-around care.

The program has been a success. It responded to over 3,000 calls since its inception in 2016, and averages over 500 calls annually. On 71 occasions last year, the CARES team was attending to a non-emergent patient who had called 9-1-1 when an emergency call came in. This freed up fire department crews to respond to fires, rescues and advanced life support emergencies that needed immediate assistance.

The CMT name was recently changed to South King County Assistance, Referral and Educational Services (South King CARES) to better reflect the goals of the program. To more fully serve the region, the team has secured contracts with neighboring fire departments Mountain View Fire & Rescue and the Enumclaw Fire Department. South King CARES is currently providing services to citizens in those jurisdictions. The expansion of service is paid for through a pooling of funds provided to each fire department by King County Basic Life Support levy monies. There is no additional cost to taxpayers in the VRFA or SKFR.

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Brittany Padjen



Carrie Talamaivao, Captain Roy Smith, Tamara Lantz, Firefighter Johan Friis

## THE VRFA WELCOMES FIVE NEW EMPLOYEES

The Valley Regional Fire Authority welcomed five new employees in early 2020; four firefighters and an accounting assistant.



**Firefighter Tiffany Carlson** was born and raised in Washington. For the past 20 years, she has worked in the customer service industry. Tiffany enjoys staying active and likes to participate in sports.

After high school Tiffany played for the Seattle Majestics Women's football team! Tiffany is looking forward to starting a new chapter in her life and is excited to be part of the team at the Valley Regional Fire Authority.



**Firefighter Alex Hough** grew up in Kent/Covington and graduated from Western Washington University with a degree in math and economics. Prior to joining the VRFA, Alex taught math for four years at Kentwood

High School. He enjoys sports and hopes to continue coaching cross country and wrestling at Kentwood.



**Firefighter Ben Teske** has been a wildland firefighter for the last decade for the WA Department of Natural Resources (DNR). His time in the DNR was spent working for the state's Helitack program as a Helicopter Manager.

He managed a modified firefighting helicopter, a crew of firefighters and support personnel while responding to wildfires across the state. Ben also worked as a volunteer firefighter EMT with Kittitas Valley Fire & Rescue in Ellensburg. In addition to firefighting duties, Ben serves as a Staff Sergeant in the Washington Army National Guard.



**Firefighter Chad Wilder** has a degree in Fire Service through Bates Technical College and has been a volunteer firefighter with Ruston Fire Department for five years. Chad also spent several years as

an elevator mechanic apprentice, installing, repairing, and modifying elevators. Most recently he spent a few months as a part-time firefighter/EMT with Vashon Fire and Rescue. In his spare time, Chad enjoys camping with his family, coaching his daughter's soccer team, cycling, and film photography.

The four new firefighters will graduate from the South King County Fire Training Consortium's Recruit Academy in June. They learn basic and advanced firefighting techniques, hazardous materials operations and obtain their EMT-B certification during the 19 week academy. After graduating from the academy they will be dispersed among the four shifts to satisfy staffing needs.



**Accounting Assistant Heather Palmer** was born and raised in Missoula, MT and moved to the Seattle Area to attend Northwest University, where she majored in Behavioral Science and Music. Before coming

to the Valley Regional Fire Authority, Heather worked as a Human Resources Specialist and Payroll Specialist for the City of Mercer Island. Heather has also worked in finance for both the Seattle Seahawks and the Seattle Sounders FC! When not at work, Heather loves watching both football and fútbol, gardening, and attending concerts, movies, and theater.

Welcome to the VRFA family Tiffany, Alex, Ben, Chad, and Heather!

## FIRE CHIEF'S MESSAGE



**BRENT D. SWEARINGEN**

if not the world. As you read elsewhere in this newsletter, the VRFA is no different in having to adjust to the current reality. The difference for us is that we are expected to make all the adjustments that others make, and still provide the seamless service that our citizens require – all while putting ourselves at greater risk of contracting the disease that we are all trying so hard to avoid.

There is a saying that is sometimes used to describe the fire service that goes, “100 years of tradition unimpeded by progress.” While the slogan is quoted in jest, there is an element of truth that everyone in the fire service recognizes. The basic function of fighting hostile fires with water looks very much the same today as it did

To say that the period since the last Fire Watch has been eventful would be the understatement of the decade. The disruptions caused by COVID-19 continues to touch every person in the United States,

during the last great pandemic – The Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. The broader fire service often does not have a reputation for being open to change.

Not here.

As the scope and severity of COVID-19 pandemic became clear, people from all ranks and divisions of the VRFA came forward with suggestions of how to better protect our people while improving service and protection to our customers. Thus you see the “Clean Car” concept mentioned in another part of this newsletter. Crews quickly adopted a scout system of assessing emergency scenes to prevent any potential contamination affecting an entire crew or station.

Our Public Information Officers (PIOs) put out a steady stream of medically sound information and advice for avoiding the spreading of disease. They also teamed with other PIOs in the region to create unified messaging throughout King County through public service announcements.

Staff officers and members of the Fire Prevention Bureau refreshed their skills and certifications so that they could be used as line firefighters and officers if needed.

Much of this activity was made possible by our support services and logistics officers. They had stockpiled sufficient pandemic protective

equipment. As a result of this foresight, the VRFA has not experienced any of the shortages that have plagued other agencies. In fact, we have been able to support other health service entities with loaner personal protective equipment (PPE) until the supply pipelines refill.

As of this writing, these efforts have paid off in the form of no VRFA responders being infected or quarantined with COVID-19 symptoms.

Lastly, I would like to thank the community for the overwhelming support that you have shown us and each other.

Within days of the schools being shut down and social distancing being mandated, we received calls from furloughed teachers offering to watch the children of first responders so they could get to work; retired firefighters, many in the at-risk age group, called and asked if there was any way they could get back in the fight; a local distillery called and offered bulk disinfectant. Local restaurants offered to drop off food for the responders. The list goes on.

The VRFA tries very hard to be worthy of the people we serve. The strength and grace we have seen from our community helps us more than you may know.

Thank you again.

## 2019 OUTSTANDING EMPLOYEES RECOGNIZED

Each year the Valley Regional Fire Authority celebrates employee achievements by recognizing a Firefighter and Fire Officer of the Year, plus awarding a member who exemplifies one of the organization's core values: selfless service, integrity and grit. Recipients are chosen by their co-workers. For 2019, Firefighter Erika Bartlett was selected as Firefighter of the Year and Captain Ryan Freed as Fire Officer of the Year. Human Resources Manager Sarah Borden was chosen for the Selfless Service Award.

### FIREFIGHTER OF THE YEAR

#### ERIKA BARTLETT



Firefighter of the year Erika Bartlett has worked for VRFA for eight years. She serves as a Medical Program Specialist (MPS) and has been instrumental in establishing a peer support program to support the mental

well-being of her fellow employees.

Erika has led the peer support program since its inception and has devoted countless hours working in regional meetings, attending trainings, developing plans, securing resources and helping to put the program in place. All of this has been in addition to her duties as a Firefighter/Emergency Medical Technician and Medical Program Specialist.

“Erika displays the behavior and actions of a leader. She is professional, knowledgeable, and good at her job. Her attitude, work ethic

and passion for helping others is evident in her work and she excels in her role as a member of the MPS team. She is able to accomplish large tasks because of her positive demeanor and is an excellent firefighter. Erika is positive, a team player, and a good communicator. She has integrity and courage and is always willing to help out. Her work on the peer support team has been invaluable to our members and department,” said Captain Melina Kuzaro.

### FIRE OFFICER OF THE YEAR

#### CAPTAIN RYAN FREED



Captain Ryan Freed has served the citizens of Algona, Auburn and Pacific for ten years and was selected for Fire Officer of the Year while working in the role of planning captain for Support Services.

Ryan has made significant contributions to the development of a Standards of Cover document, the most recent VRFA Strategic Plan, and the ongoing process of accreditation. This work lays out a comprehensive path for the VRFA and will benefit our citizens and employees for many years into the future.

“Ryan is an exemplary, outgoing professional, who always carries himself with professionalism. He works to develop a positive and inclusive team environment and is dedicated to the

organization and members. He has stepped up as a leader, and is doing great things for not only the VRFA, but the fire service as a whole,” said Battalion Chief Paul Strong.

### SELFLESS SERVICE AWARD

#### SARAH BORDEN



Sarah Borden is the recipient of the Selfless Service award. She joined the VRFA in 2014 as the Human Resources Manager. In her role, Sarah is responsible for the recruitment and hiring of new

employees, promotional testing, administering employee benefits and contracts, labor relations and a myriad of other duties. Sarah is known for her ability to juggle many diverse tasks with the utmost professionalism and speed, all while striving to create a fun and supportive environment for those around her.

“Sarah is always looking out for others, is dedicated to her family and her VRFA family. Selfless could be her middle name as she displays that value every day. She balances work-life in a positive light and is incredibly giving of herself. Sarah's honesty, empathy and respect of privacy has created a human resources trust level that we are extremely grateful to have,” said Deputy Chief Dave Larberg.



# THE VRFA GIVES BACK

## FIREFIGHTER STAIR CLIMB

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the Annual Leukemia & Lymphoma Firefighter Stairclimb at the Columbia Tower in downtown Seattle will now be a virtual climb. The virtual climb will be held on June 13th and all profits will go to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. The VRFA Team has raised and will be donating over \$12,000 for this event.



## RELAY FOR LIFE

Every year the VRFA and the Valley Professional Firefighters Local 1352 participate in Relay for Life. Participating teams fundraise throughout the year and participate in a walking event where at least one team member is on the track at all times throughout the duration of the event. Funds are then donated to the American Cancer Society who returns those funds to the community to provide cancer patients and their families with much needed resources. The event is usually held in May but due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, this year's in-person event has been moved to September. This year the VRFA team will donate over \$3000 to the cause.



## BIKE HELMETS

In an ongoing effort to make sure all kids in our community have bike helmets, the VRFA along with Local 1352, secure grant funding and donations to purchase low cost helmets. If your child is in need of a helmet please call 253-288-5800 or email us at AskTheVRFA@vrfa.org for more information on how to pick up a helmet and/or instructions on how to fit a helmet.



## VRFA VULNERABLE POPULATIONS PROGRAM EXPANDS

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Since 85 percent of the cases the CARES team sees have a behavioral health component, additional social work expertise was needed to serve the larger response area. One additional full-time social worker was added in March this year, increasing staff to five total members.

"Social workers in fire service have a unique opportunity to provide assistance to patients

in real time, a service unlike any other I've experienced. With the access that EMS provides, and the clinical skills of a social worker, our team is uniquely positioned to address the medical and psychosocial needs of the patient in real time," said CARES Social Worker Carrie Talamaivao.

## FIREWORKS



The VRFA serves the cities of Algona, Auburn and Pacific. All three cities have local ordinances that address the purchase and discharge of fireworks within their respective city limits. The rules are clear and easy to follow. Specific information can be found in your city ordinances, or in the Community/Safety Information section of [www.vrfa.org](http://www.vrfa.org).



## VRFA Services

The VRFA provides CPR and First Aid classes, complimentary blood pressure checks, fire station tours, custom-fit bicycle helmets, custom-fit life jackets, smoke alarms, child car seat inspections and more.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

call **253-288-5800** or go to **[www.vrfa.org](http://www.vrfa.org)**

## VRFA Administration

### Brent Swearingen

Fire Chief/Administrator

### Brad Thompson

Deputy Chief of Operations

### Dave Larberg

Deputy Chief of Technical Services

### Mark Horaski

Chief Financial Officer

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### Troy Linnell

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### Lynda Osborn

Algona City Council

### David Storaasli

Pacific City Council



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