

This article originally ran in the June 2011 issue of the iWomen member newsletter *FireWork*.

## Gender Privacy in the Modern Firehouse – Part 3

By Candice Wong

We have reached the third and final installment on this Gender Privacy in the Modern Firehouse series. In this final article, we will wrap up with a review of how department policies, operations, company culture, best practices, standards and building codes all play into the solution(s) for achieving gender privacy along with some practical steps on how to attain your new gender privacy policies and goals.

### Company Culture and Fire Operations

A department's unique culture and history is something you want to celebrate, but also handle with consideration and respect. A measurement for



success in any project is to have buy-in on the design solutions from the top down and bottom up. Actively engaging fire personnel will result in their advocating and welcoming change. There are inherent differences in the operations of a fire station depending on the make-up of the department. For instance, the operations and facility needs of a volunteer based department are different than those of a career department. Again a review of what fire operations look like today and what they may look like in the future is important to consider. We find that there are many issues to consider when a department is in transition from a volunteer based organization to a combined (paid on call & volunteers) to career department in the future.

### Department Policies

As discussed in the first article, establishing the department's policies on gender privacy will aid in all the discussion and decisions needed downstream to make implementation a reality. Gathering input from a wide cross section of the department (Chiefs, captains, and line personnel) would hopefully lead to a healthy discussion on this issue and establish short and long term goals for the department. Keep in mind to look at your department's existing demographics (men and women ratios) and also what the vision is for hiring in the next 5, 10 and 20 years. The policies should recognize if the department is striving for gender "specific", "neutral" or "friendly" solutions for the living quarters.

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### A Very Basic Assessment

Once the department's policies have been established and the short and long terms goals identified, it is time to take inventory of what you have in each one of your existing fire stations for the living quarters. A basic assessment of your existing facilities is two-fold. First you must establish the parameters for the basic assessment so that the data collected is consistent for each fire station. Second, you will need to choose a method for accomplishing the assessment.

The basic assessment should include the following for each fire station:

- Age of the existing building.
- Discovery of any relevant renovations or improvements to the existing facility.
- Record the type and size (overall square footage) of existing dormitories, bunk rooms, restroom and locker room.
- Record general condition of each space.
- Document with photos of each space.
- If there are existing plans, collect and keep them for reference.

To implement the assessment, you may want to consider choosing one of the following options:

- Establish a committee to specifically look at gender privacy issues. This is a great way to engage fire personnel in the process.
  - The design committee should include a wide demographic in rank from both genders.
  - Personnel can be

assigned or selected on a volunteer basis.

- The number of committee members should be reasonable and relative to the scope of the project.
- Depending on your department's budget, you might consider engaging a design professional or City/County staff to implement the assessment.
  - For older or complex facilities, engaging a design professional or experienced City/County staff would be very beneficial as there are many issues to work through on complicated facilities.
  - When selecting a design professional, make sure to look for architects and engineers that have experience in renovation and/or construction of fire stations.

### Establishing a Road Map to Success

With the raw data from the assessment(s) and the department's policies in hand, the next step is to determine "*what are the next steps?*" My best advice when you reach this stage is to engage a design professional to help you sort through the information and assist with establishing a plan of action and budget.

Some of the things that a design professional can assist you with are as follows:

- Determine how best to implement changes.

- Replace part or all of the existing living quarters.
- Renovation of the existing spaces.
- Expansion or new construction.
- Costs associated for implementing changes.
- Develop sketches to determine if the anticipated changes will fit the available space.
- Assess the physical condition of your existing fire stations. Are there limitations based on the existing building or building systems (electrical, plumbing, etc.)?
- Analyze the extent of upgrades required to meet current building codes (electrical, mechanical, plumbing, etc.).
- Will you need temporary facilities during construction?
- Is phasing of construction needed?
- Is there space to meet current and future needs?

### Best Practices

Through fire personnel use and feedback and input from design professionals, a number of best practices associated with the living quarters in fire houses should be incorporated. We recommend that your department incorporate the following measures:

- Provide vented wardrobe lockers and places to hang wet towels outside of the lockers
- Provisions for operable windows and ceiling fans for natural ventilation as well as mechanical heating and cooling in sleeping quarters
- Provisions for adjustable reading lights above beds in sleeping rooms

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- Provisions for separate lights for alerting system from general lighting as required by building and electrical codes
- Provisions for natural daylighting in restrooms and locker rooms

### Standards and Code Considerations

There are numerous code requirements and standards to consider when taking on a renovation, expansion or new construction. We recommend that your department engage a design professional to assist you with the review of these items as different regions of the United States use different building codes and have specific local requirements. The following are some standards and general code requirements to keep in mind as you begin to plan your improvements.

- Provisions for one egress window for each sleeping room or dormitory.
- Provisions for station alerting system in sleeping quarters. Provide one speaker in each sleeping room or multiple speakers for a dormitory.
- Provisions for fire protection and fire alarm systems.
- Provisions for 100% ventilation using conditioned outside air for locker rooms.
- Verify the code required number of plumbing fixtures for men and women for each fire station.
- Verify existing lighting levels are sufficient for each space and use.
- Verify existing lighting and mechanical systems are compliant with current energy codes and requirements.

### Conclusion

With integrated crews of men and women firefighters the question

of “how to provide facilities for both sexes” started to arise and redefine how the spaces for living quarters work in today’s fire stations. Whether it is new construction or a renovation, the question of gender specific, neutral or friendly should be addressed to provide short term and long term solutions for gender privacy.

Living spaces for the firefighter should be comfortable and based on the needs of your specific department. In this series, we have looked at many of the available options to address the gender privacy issues facing today’s fire departments. It is important that whichever solutions and options are chosen in the end, that the final design(s) are based on consensus and the opportunity to participate in their development was open to those who wished to actively contribute. These are key elements to finding a lasting solution that best meets the needs of your firefighters and department.



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