

Emergency service workers face shocking levels of alcohol-related abuse



Emergency service workers face shocking levels of alcohol-related abuse, new figures reveal.

Police officers, paramedics and firefighters have been punched, threatened and spat on as they stand on the front line at times of emergency.

But now – for the first time ever – the three blue light services have united with one strong and unequivocal voice to demand it ends.

A new staff survey reveals 999 workers report that alcohol misuse is a contributory factor in around half of incidents.

Fully one in three have been subjected to physical abuse while attending an incident as a result of alcohol misuse and two thirds have experienced verbal abuse.

Assistant Chief Constable Mark Williams of Police Scotland said: “The demands being placed on the emergency services by people who are drunk are huge.

“On many occasions, it delays police officers, firefighters and paramedics from getting to members of the public who really do need our protection and help.”

Assistant Chief Officer David McGown of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service added: “The public will be shocked to hear our frontline firefighters and control officers are often abused and obstructed by people under the influence of alcohol.

“They are all working to save lives and protect property. Being drunk is absolutely no excuse for impeding emergency responders or directing abuse at them. We are determined to get the message across – this is reckless, criminal behaviour that risks lives and it can never be tolerated.”

Daren Mochrie, the Director of Service Delivery for the Scottish Ambulance Service, commented: “Alcohol has a significant impact on ambulance operations across Scotland.

“Crews are responding to alcohol related incidents every day of the week and at all times – it is no longer a weekend phenomenon.

“Our staff are highly trained specialist clinicians who all too often have to respond to people who are simply intoxicated, delaying their response to patients with a genuine medical need.

“There can also be wider impact on our operations as precious resources often have to be taken off the road to be cleaned after an intoxicated patient has been sick, which takes time and removes an ambulance that could be available to respond to a medical emergency.

A recent survey conducted by each of the services reveals a depressing picture.

Fully a third of blue-light workers reported that they had been subjected to physical abuse while attending an alcohol-related incident within the previous four weeks, while two thirds said they had experienced verbal abuse.

Roughly half of all incidents that 999 workers attended in the previous four weeks were alcohol related and almost two thirds of emergency personnel had faced difficulties in securing urgent information because of victims or callers being intoxicated.

Anonymous responses to the surveys depict the sad reality facing those on the frontline.

A firefighter recalled: "I was in breathing apparatus at a house fire and I found a man lying in his bed. He had tried to cook after coming back from a night out but he was drunk and fell asleep.

"The smoke alarm was blaring but he only woke up when I shook him to see if he was alive. He punched me in the face."

An ambulance crew member shared: "I have been assaulted, spat at and verbally abused too many times to mention.

"If people could only see the effect they have on an incident when they're under the influence of alcohol. We have to spend as much time looking after our own safety as looking after our patient."

Police officers, ambulance personnel and firefighters all reported delays in getting potentially vital information as a result of someone being drunk.

The actions of people under the influence accounted for all three services facing needless incidents and nuisance calls, tying up resources that could be needed at emergencies elsewhere.

One response revealed an ambulance on its way to a life-threatening medical emergency was delayed by drunk revellers who ran into the road and danced in front of the vehicle.

Staff handling 999 calls highlighted their struggles to get key information about emergencies, describing having to battle to understand callers so drunk they are unable to give their location or even state what they think is happening.

ACO McGowan explained: "Officers answering 999 calls from intoxicated people often struggle to get details of where the incident is and what is involved, which makes it much harder

for them to know what resources to send.

“Being unable to get reliable, accurate information also means that firefighters can be sent to incidents without vital information regarding people involved and the risks they may face.

“When someone is trapped in a fire this could mean our teams may not know where to focus their search, which therefore exposes them to dangerous environments for longer as they attempt to locate the person.”

Ambulance Director Daren Mochrie, commented: “Our frontline staff should not have to fear for their own safety when treating patients, but alcohol is a key factor in most assaults.

“They respond to patients in all weathers and situations and deserve the public’s respect for the high quality care that they provide.

“However, at times they are verbally abused and have to put up with being pushed and spat on, as well as being kicked, punched and in some extreme cases assaulted with a variety of weapons.

“Instances of this kind of behaviour would fall dramatically if people learned to drink responsibly.”

ACC Mark Williams said: “The findings of this survey are as stark as they are unacceptable.

“Over a four week period 36 per cent of police officers were physically abused and 75 per cent were verbally abused as a result of individuals who chose to misuse alcohol.

“Let’s be clear – this behaviour is having an impact on the capacity of all the emergency services. There is an impact from drinking too much alcohol and I really hope that people take some time to consider and reflect on these findings.

“We all want to enjoy ourselves and have a great night out but think about the impact you’ll have if you take it too far.”

Alison Douglas, the Chief Executive of Alcohol Focus Scotland, gave the charity’s backing to the campaign.

She said: “Our emergency services have to spend far too much time and resources dealing with the illness, injuries, disorder and violence caused by excessive drinking, often at risk to themselves.

“Reducing our overall alcohol consumption, with particular targeting of high risk groups, will help ease the pressure on our police, fire and ambulance staff.

“But encouraging people to drink less is difficult when we are surrounded by cheap alcohol that is constantly promoted as an everyday product.”