



They Just Want to Do Their Jobs

Public safety personnel with limb loss face obstacles returning to work

by Scott McNutt

Recent news stories have highlighted how the U.S. military is providing its personnel with limb loss with state-of-the-art prostheses and is working to return those who want to do so to active duty.

Such staunch assistance is in direct contrast to the hit-and-miss approach taken with firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and other public safety personnel with limb loss in jurisdictions across America. Some return to duty with the support and assistance of their supervisors. Some are forced to fight their way back to duty in the courts. And some never again get the opportunity to do the jobs they love.

National Standards, Local Interpretations

David Dunville, national director of the Amputee Firefighters Association (AFFA), says there are two issues that arise when firefighters, police officers and EMTs with amputations try to return to duty. One is the interpretation of National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards.

"Most states go under the NFPA," says Dunville. "One part of the standards state that, to become a firefighter, your ankles have to be able to move or the wrist has to be able to move. And that right there means that anyone using a prosthesis, which doesn't have an ankle or a wrist, can't pass."

However, requalifying personnel who lose limbs after passing the initial test is left to local jurisdictions. In some cases, possibly where concern has been expressed over the liability involved in returning firefighters with limb loss to active duty, NFPA standards may be strictly adhered to. "The interpretation of those standards is the problem," says Dunville. "They interpret, they read into it, and they read around it."

For 18 years, Wayne Mosley was a firefighter in Oklahoma for the Yukon Fire Department. In 2005, a motorcycle accident cost him his left leg above the knee. He says that local authorities ping-ponged his case between them, until he was finally forced into early retirement.

"The pension board pushed it to the point where they said it was up to the city, the city would say, 'No, it's up to the pension board.' 'No, it's back up to the city.' And they fought that decision back and forth. Liability. That's all it was."

Mosley hopes a new, uniform standard is established under which he could return to duty, even if only in an administrative role. If he

returned to duty, "I hope it would set a precedent for other public safety personnel with limb loss in Oklahoma," he says.

Dunville himself is another example. He was a firefighter for nearly four years until an accident in the fire station led to the amputation of his lower left leg in 2003. He has not returned to active duty. "I'm still trying to get back," he says. "Unfortunately, it always seemed that whenever I got the door open, it got shut because, 'Now we have *this* question...' They just like to find new hoops for me to jump through."

Dunville says that departments supportive of returning personnel may not strictly follow the NFPA standards or will interpret them favorably, because they see that the standards don't adequately take into account the functionality of modern prostheses. In some cases, public safety personnel have only had to pass the same written, physical and agility tests they took when they joined.

Pamela Lafoe, of the Citrus County Sheriff's Department, was in a motorcycle accident in 2006 with her friend Kathleen "Kitty" Dolan, who works for Pasco County Fire Rescue. As a result of the accident, Lafoe had a hemipelvectomy on her left side. Dolan's left leg was amputated below the knee.

"I was back less than two months later to the job that I was doing, which is the training officer," explains Dolan. "I have to go through an agility test. There's no problem with that. Everybody in the department has to go through the same agility test. I can crawl around on my hands and knees in a blackened space and I can



Los Angeles Fire Captain Greg Malais prepares for the Achilles Hope & Possibility Fun Run at the 2007 ACA Conference