TOWN OF CANTON VOLUNTEER Fire & EMS Department

Valuing Life…at a Moment's Notice

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Canton's Volunteer Firefighters Plunge into Cold Water Rescue Drill

Planning Before Taking Action is Key to Life Safety

Canton, CT February, 2009…. "Did you hear about those ice fishermen out on Lake Erie?" began Town of Canton Volunteer Fire & EMS Department Chief Richard Hutchings. "It took 15 fire departments and the Coast Guard over 5 hours to rescue over 100 of them off of an ice floe. One of them fell into the water and didn't make it."

"While we don't expect anything that dramatic to happen in Canton," Hutchings continued, "we do train each winter for a wide variety of cold water emergency scenarios. Whether it's ice fishermen who miscalculate the depth of the ice; people who follow lost pets or friends in trouble onto a seemingly frozen pond; or boaters whose canoe capsizes into the still frigid river of early spring, we have to be ready with the right planning, training, equipment and response teams to save lives."

So, on a brisk winter evening in February, about a dozen volunteer firefighters descended on Carpenter Pond in North Canton to drill on the fundamentals of cold water rescue.

The following scenario was given to firefighters: A 9-11 call has come in on a person who has fallen into an icy pond. "While your first instinct," began Fire Captain and lead Instructor Steve LaPointe, "may be to take action and jump into the water, that is exactly the wrong thing to do. That's how we end up with a multiple victim emergency."

"Instead," continued LaPointe, "it is critical to approach this type of emergency in a multi-faceted way. Because time is of the essence, the most important thing you need is a plan - *before* you go into the water - to make the best use of available, skilled resources."

Step I: Information Gathering

So, water rescue begins on land. Using line of site markers such as a rock formation, the bridge etc., firefighters collect information from witnesses to help determine where the victim(s) was last seen. Knowing the terrain down river is also an essential part of piecing together the puzzle.

This information is combined with an assessment of the speed and direction of the current and observations about changing weather conditions that could further compromise the rescue. The few minutes it takes to gather this type of information greatly enhances the chances of a successful rescue.

Step II: Preparation &Teamwork

The primary rescue team for each victim, is comprised of two firefighters. One firefighter is charged with the actual physical rescue of the victim. A second firefighter, remains on shore and holds a safety rope that is tethered to the firefighter in the water.

All firefighters working in the `hot zone,' typically within a foot of the water, must wear personal protective equipment, (PPE), including: a personal flotation device, gloves, boots that provide traction and a vented, water rescue helmet.

For firefighters who will potentially have to physically swim or crawl out over the ice to retrieve the victim, PPE consists of a thermal, dry suit designed to keep the wearer buoyant. There is an integrated harness on both the front and back of the suit where safety rope can be tethered. Basic tools for cold water rescue include: synthetic, brightly colored polyethylene rope and awls/picks to help the firefighter crawl over the ice to the victim.

As in all emergency situations, EMS personnel stand by ready to administer immediate critical care to the victim(s) and to monitor the condition of rescuers.

Step III: Communication

While dry suits allow the firefighter to survive in the frigid water, their integrated face flaps make verbal communication difficult. So, basic hand signals to represent `stop, go, more or less line' are reviewed before anyone goes into the water.

As the number of victims multiplies, it becomes increasingly important to have one individual who is responsible for monitoring both the progress of the rescuers and the firefighters who are tending the tether lines. Is more or less line needed? Are tether lines becoming entangled? Are there obstacles in the way that will impede the rescue?

Step IV: Action

There are four basic tactical options for cold water rescue. The safest course of action is to attempt to ***REACH*** the victim using branches, pike poles, ladders or other hand tools. The victim grasps the tool and is pulled to the closest solid ground.

When the victim is further off shore, but still able to assist in their own rescue, firefighters can ***THROW*** the polyethylene rope out to them. If, however, the victim is suffering from hypothermia or is otherwise unable to assist in their rescue, firefighters can slide or ***ROW*** the Department's inflatable boat, Marine I out to them.

The very last resort, because it's the most dangerous, is for a firefighter to physically ***GO*** into the water to save the victim. The firefighter crawls or swims out to the victim, ties a rope around them and clips that rope onto the main tether line on their dry suit. With a tap on top of their head to signify that they're ready to go, the firefighter on shore hauls them both to safety. This final option may be the only choice available by the time firefighters get out to the scene.

Step V: Expect the Unexpected

Based upon experience, firefighters have come to expect the unexpected in cold water rescue. For example:

- The current under the ice is always stronger than you think. Fast moving water beneath the ice can drag both the rescuer and victim under.

- Ice, no matter what its thickness in any particular spot, is unpredictable, uneven and variable in depth in all bodies of water.

- Changing weather conditions can quickly compromise the surface of the ice. This is what happened on Lake Erie.

- In many cases, by the time the 9-11 call comes in, valuable time has been spent by well intended individuals who have attempted a rescue or have not grasped the urgency of the situation.

- Victims may actually hinder their own rescue. They may panic or begin to suffer the affects of hypothermia which can actually cause them to attack the rescuer.

Canton's Fire & EMS Department is an organization of volunteers. So, the Department will only have a limited number of individuals who are available at any given time. The shortage of manpower is especially acute during the day when most firefighters are at jobs outside of town. So, many times firefighters must play multiple roles in emergency situations.

"It's not ideal," notes Fire Safety Officer David Leff, "especially in these types of harsh environments, but we do what we have to do. That's why the training and planning is so important to keeping everyone safe and alive."

Anyone interested in becoming a member of the Town of Canton Volunteer Fire & EMS Department can visit www.cantonfireandems.org, or drop by the Collinsville, North Canton or Canton firehouses any Monday evening during The Department's weekly practice drill at 7:30 p.m.

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