

San Antonio Fire Department athletic trainer Deena Kilpatrick, MS, LAT, ATC, provides care to more than 1,800 firefighters and civilian employees and attends department training events.

Kilpatrick shifted from the secondary school setting to the public safety sector after learning about the health care needs of firefighters.



CARING FOR THOSE WHO CARE FOR OTHERS

Public safety is an emerging setting athletic trainers are finding themselves in. Two athletic trainers share what it is like to care for firefighters.

By Beth Sitzler

"**A**Ts Are Health Care" is more than just the theme of the 2019 National Athletic Training Month. Since the profession's inception in 1950, athletic trainers have looked at the different ways they can use their skillset to care for a variety of patient populations. From youth athletes to astronauts, athletic trainers have a place in every setting and within every active population.

The number of settings in which athletic trainers can be found is constantly increasing. Many are thinking outside the box to ensure all patients who may need an athletic trainer

have access to one. Athletic trainers Deena Kilpatrick, MS, LAT, ATC, and Hunt Whitten, ATC, LAT, are prime examples as each have worked tirelessly to ensure firefighters in their local communities have access to athletic trainers and health care.

"It's humbling [to care for firefighters]," said Kilpatrick, an athletic trainer with the San Antonio Fire Department. "You're helping the people we call on our worst day. Working with this population is easy – they just want to help. As an emerging setting, it just makes sense to have athletic trainers [care for] firefighters."

Previously employed in the secondary school setting, Kilpatrick became familiar with the physical demands and health care needs of firefighters after working closely with a high school friend in the profession.

"I was on maternity leave, and he called me one too many times to fix something wrong with him, and I thought, 'What is going on over there?'" she said, adding that she spent three months researching firefighting and how athletic trainers fit into the profession. "I put together a business proposal and met with the fire department [in 2014]. It took almost two years to get funding.



Through Metis Tactical, Hunt Whitten, ATC, LAT, contracts with the Ponderosa and Spring fire departments, in the Houston area, to provide an array of injury prevention and rehabilitation services.



BONUS ONLINE CONTENT

Spring firefighter and military veteran Jason Randall shares how athletic trainer Hunt Whitten, ATC, LAT, helped him overcome a debilitating back injury and remain on the job in a post available on the NATA Now blog at www.nata.org/blog.



A firefighter himself, Whitten understands the demands of the profession and how athletic trainers can improve the health and wellness of those in public safety.

“I kept working at it. Once a month, I would come up with a reason to contact the chief. I wanted my proposal to stay on his mind.”

Finally, in 2015, Kilpatrick was contracted by the City of San Antonio and began seeing patients. Two years later, SAFD Chief Charles Hood pushed for the contract position to become a full-time employee position.

“It’s my belief that firefighters have to arrive emotionally prepared [and] physically fit to do a very dangerous job,” Hood said. “We go on 1,100 dispatches every single day, so if we’re not in our best shape and if we’re not feeling well, that can, in turn, be detrimental to that citizen we’re going to. If we can’t take care of ourselves, how can we take care of someone who is having their worst day?”

Wanting to ensure such a position was warranted, the city issued a third-party study to be conducted to weigh the potential pros and cons. The study came back with a resounding “yes,” the athletic training position was warranted.

Kilpatrick went through the interview process, and, in January 2018, became the second athletic trainer ever hired as a full-time employee with a city fire department.

Whitten’s journey to working with firefighters was also long, but his started in high school.

“I joined the [Ponderosa Fire Department, in Texas,] at the age of 17,” he said, adding that he received his EMT certification when he was a senior in high school. “I graduated high school and thought about becoming a full-time firefighter, but decided I wanted to see what else I could do.”

He attended Baylor University, where he studied athletic training. While in college, he would still venture home once a month for his shift at the fire department. After earning his degree, he moved back to the Houston area and began working as an outreach athletic trainer. In this role, he was tasked with building an athletic training program at the high school he was assigned.

“I loved building the athletic training program at the school from the ground up,” he said. “I loved showing [stakeholders] the need that was there and how we could change the world for [these athletes].”

Drawn to this idea of building something from the ground up, Whitten decided to merge his athletic training and firefighting passions, and created Metis Tactical with business partner Sean Carey, PES, CPT. Through Metis Tactical, Whitten and Carey set out to provide evidence-based injury prevention solutions to emergency service organizations.

In addition to reaching out to the Ponderosa Fire Department, where Whitten is still a firefighter and the health and safety officer, Metis Tactical contacted the nearby Spring Fire Department about conducting a pilot program.

“[During the pilot,] I did a movement assessment, identifying compensatory movement patterns – things that could lead to injury – and built a program that would address that while looking at the big picture and figuring out how we can make

them the most prepared for the occupational hazards they’ll encounter,” Whitten said.

GETTING A FOOT IN THE DOOR

Even after her proposal with the city was accepted, Kilpatrick had one major hurdle to overcome: lack of awareness. First, she had to get word out to the approximately 1,800 firefighters and hundreds of civilian employees that she existed and was available to them. Although an email was sent out and she personally visited each of the city’s 54 fire stations, word of mouth was her greatest source of advertisement – as was her location in the fire department’s Health & Wellness Center.

CARING FOR THOSE WHO CARE FOR OTHERS

Movement assessments allow Whitten to develop individualized plans to improve movement deficiencies and prevent injuries.

BONUS ONLINE CONTENT

Visit the NATA Now blog, www.nata.org/blog, to read a post from the Council on Practice Advancement on the expansion of athletic training into the public safety sector.



Kilpatrick sees approximately 15 patients a day in the San Antonio Fire Department's athletic training facility, where she treats a range of issues, from strains and sprains to ACL reconstruction rehabilitation.

Even those who were familiar with the athletic training profession were unsure how she could help them.

"My only experience with an athletic trainer was when I played sports in high school, so I didn't know what to expect when I started seeing her," said firefighter James Perez, who sees Kilpatrick two to three times a week for a dislocated rib. "When you're a firefighter, you usually get a small injury that turns into something bigger. Here, you can [see the athletic trainer] every day and

know your patient population, you will not be well-received."

Whitten said he went in knowing the numerous costs associated with injury, from paying overtime to fill open positions and worker's compensation to incurring increased insurance premiums. There also is a cost on the injured firefighter unable to work.

"They have families that are relying on them," he said. "Also, they're away from their support system. Being a first responder is an identity, and being out of work due to injury for an extended period of time can threaten that identity, which takes a toll on their emotional health."

Understanding the challenges they faced going in, Kilpatrick and Whitten worked to earn the trust and confidence of their firefighters, EMTs and administration. They have done so by proving how their skillset can keep first responders on the job and, if injured, get them back to duty quicker.

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- SAN ANTONIO FIREFIGHTER JAMES PEREZ

"I was walking by to get my annual wellness check and I saw people in here," said Blaze Cortines, a 23-year employee of the San Antonio Fire Department. "I started asking around and decided to check it out. It's been great having her here. I've been working with her for a month now and I've told a lot of people about her."

Once word began to spread, Kilpatrick then had to explain her role as an athletic trainer.

"I had to do a lot of education [when I was first hired]," Kilpatrick said. "Often times, they thought my job was to yell at them as they worked out."

do something about it before it turns into something bigger."

When getting his pilot program with the Spring Fire Department off the ground, Whitten's background in firefighting helped him foster relationships with stakeholders and gain their buy-in. By showcasing his athletic training skillset and firefighting insight, he built credibility as a health care provider capable of working with this unique patient population.

"To be successful in public safety, [athletic trainers] have to know the ins, the outs, the everyday intricacies of the life of a first responder," Whitten said. "If you don't

THE PAY OFF

Since starting with the San Antonio Fire Department in 2015, Kilpatrick has seen an increase in the number of patients she treats. Her first year, she treated 378 injuries. In 2018, that number jumped to 411.

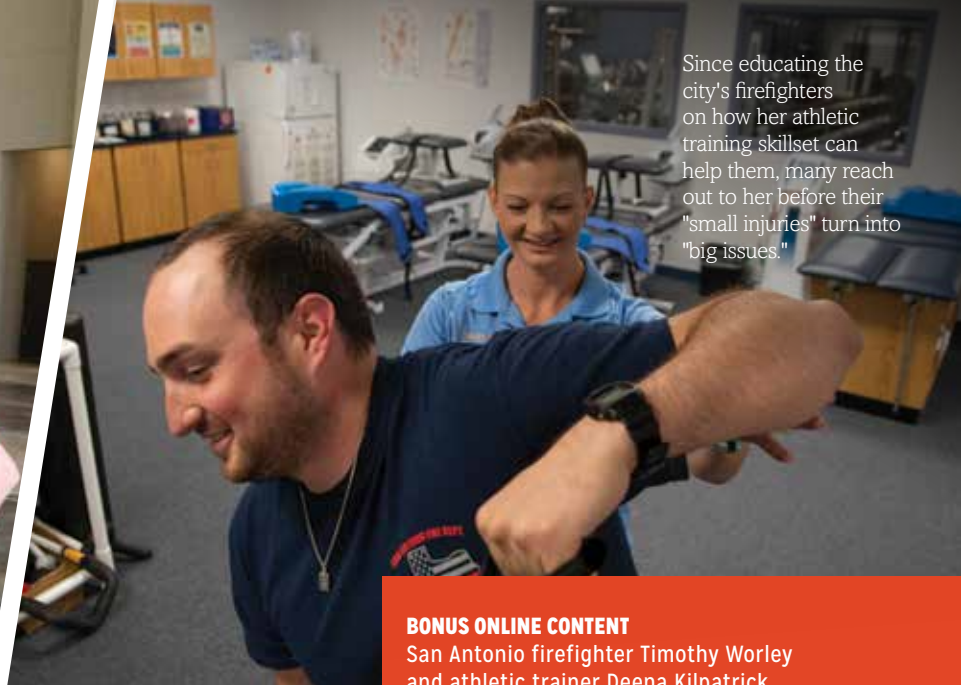
"I see roughly 15 patients a day," she said, adding that she also attends various department trainings, including those conducted by the water rescue team.

Sprains and strains are the most common injuries she sees—they're also the most common injuries that lead to on-the-job time loss.

"Whether a firefighter or EMS, the job is very physical, so it's not uncommon to



During his time working with the Spring and Ponderosa fire departments, a noticeable shift in culture has taken place, with firefighters focusing more on their health and well-being.



Since educating the city's firefighters on how her athletic training skillset can help them, many reach out to her before their "small injuries" turn into "big issues."

BONUS ONLINE CONTENT

San Antonio firefighter Timothy Worley and athletic trainer Deena Kilpatrick, MS, LAT, ATC, discuss his road to recovery after ACL reconstruction in a post available on the NATA Now blog at www.nata.org/blog.

to follow their prescribed routine on their own.

"After the 90 days, we went back to leadership and discussed our results, our successes and the cost of building a 12-month program that was financially feasible and could be rolled out to all of their full-time, part-time and volunteer firefighters," said Whitten, adding that the program rolled out in July 2018 to all 200-plus Spring Fire Department employees.

"One of the biggest challenges was showing how [athletic trainers] fit into the daily culture and how it transitions over to the occupational demands. So, showing how what we do carries over into the real world."

Since establishing the partnership with Whitten, the Ponderosa and Spring fire departments have both reported a noticeable shift in their departmental culture.

"We've had a reduction in line-of-duty injuries since [our firefighters have] been prehabilitating," said Robert Logan, Spring Fire Department assistant fire chief. "It's been a total culture shift in the department just from the fact that they understand that health and wellness is imperative for them and that they'll do whatever they need to be prepared for their shift."

"We should do everything we can to prevent injuries, and having an athletic trainer is definitely a way to do that," said Spring Fire Department Fire Chief Scott Seifert. "Our budget for 2019 is \$16.3 million. Out of that, \$12 million is [spent] on personnel. So, we want to ensure our personnel are healthy and well and are able to do their job."

get hurt," she said. "After 20 years in the department, you're going to have some aches and pains."

"Firefighters are like football players, basketball players, baseball players, except we are expected to go from stagnant to moving at a moment's notice – without stretching or warming up," said Timothy Worley, who has been with the San Antonio Fire Department for 16 years. "The average fire lasts three to four hours, and we're wearing 75 to 80 pounds of gear, dry, without the hose line."

During the pilot program with the Spring Fire Department in 2018, Whitten spent 90 days with a group of 15 firefighters – three from five different fire stations. He spent the first month working hands-on with the group, conducting movement assessments and creating individualized plans to correct deficiencies as well as group programs that address already-existing health and fitness standards. After that first month, Whitten integrated an app into the process, allowing the firefighters

While incorporating athletic trainers will help their fire departments save money by keeping employees on the job, more importantly, Hood and Seifert said it shows their firefighters that their health and well-being matter, and that their fire departments are willing to invest in them.

"This athletic training facility and our athletic trainer are the greatest assets our fire department has," Worley said.

FINDING A PLACE IN PUBLIC SAFETY

The public safety sector is an emerging setting many athletic trainers are gravitating toward. To better serve a tactical athlete, such as a firefighter, Whitten said it's important to understand what they go through physically and emotionally.

"Know the demands of the patient population," he said. "If you can, go through volunteer firefighter training. If you really are passionate about this, go through what your patient population goes through. Immerse yourself in the setting. Also, remain diligent on best practices and identify where else you can use your knowledge and skillset. Look at how you can best serve your patient population."

To athletic trainers wanting to break into the public service setting, Kilpatrick's advice is simple: "Be patient. Be persistent. It's going to move slowly and it's going to be a lot of work; but, in time, that work will be very rewarding." §