

# Safety and prevention are focus of new Memphis fire director

By Hank Dudding (Contact), Memphis Commercial Appeal  
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One trip through the fire department's torturous "smoke house" made Alvin Benson think twice about his career choice.

Billowing with smoke from damp, smoldering straw, the structure taught recruits to stay low, and in 1986 that meant fumbling through without oxygen masks.

Recruits often came out wheezing and coughing, sometimes vomiting.



**Memphis Fire Department Director Alvin Benson watches Lester Community Center volunteers Wilton Jones (left) and Derek Williams relax with a game of checkers. Benson, 44, was promoted to director in July. He hopes to build a department that depends less on smoke-filled heroics and more on saving lives through prevention and safety. "We've got to go beyond just water on fire," he said.**



**Memphis Fire Department Director Alvin Benson chats with volunteer Terrence Jones at the Lester Community Center.**

"I thought, 'Wow, this is a tough job. If these are the kinds of conditions I'm going to have to experience, it's going to be a little tough.' "

Benson endured the training, and 22 years later, as director of Memphis Fire Services, he hopes to build a department that depends less on smoke-filled heroics and more on prevention and safety.

"We were expected to go in and tough it out. That was part of the old culture of firefighting," he said, "We've got to go beyond just water on fire."

Benson wants everyone to use smoke detectors. He wants builders to install sprinklers in houses, and landlords to maintain their properties.

And he wants to keep firefighters safe.

For instance, the department is buying devices that monitor vital signs during training. Four years ago, a 41-year-old recruit suffered brain damage during a hardcore training event dubbed "Hell Night."

The department learned from the experience, he said, imposing an age limit of 35 on recruits and instituting "rehab" breaks to monitor firefighters' conditions and cool them off if needed.

But he makes no apologies for rigorous training.

"Training is tough," he said. "Firefighting is a tough profession. The training has to reflect true conditions."

Benson, 44, who succeeded Richard Arwood in July, watches over the department from an office above the Downtown fire station on Front, a TV tuned to CNN at his desk and the Mississippi River outside his window.

He'll be paid \$133,000 a year to run the 1,897-member department.

Carol Sheehan, a local fire engine buff and a former copy editor for The Commercial Appeal, met Benson through her volunteer work at the Fire Museum of Memphis.

She remembers at least one appearance by a shirtless Benson in a firefighter calendar that raised money for the burn unit at The Med.

Perhaps mercifully, she can't find her copy. "I've mentioned it a few times, and he's laughed and said, 'Oh, let's forget about that,' " said Sheehan. "He's embarrassed about that in a way, but it was tastefully done."

Milton Craft, another local fire engine buff, got to know Benson through a basketball league their sons played in at Bellevue Baptist Church.

"He'd show up on Saturdays in his uniform pants and a T-shirt," Craft said. "You could tell he came right from work."

Although Benson was only a spectator, Craft said he was quick to offer help.

"If I had to have a coach, he's the kind of coach I'd want. He's just a really nice guy who has a genuine interest in other people."

Benson speaks of the department with an unusual pride, repeatedly referring to firefighters as heroes.

"It's an esteemed profession," he said.

He's already weathered his first crisis, the fire in Orange Mound that killed seven people last month, and saw a communications zigzag in which the department announced the fire's cause would never be known, then said its investigation was continuing. He called that a misunderstanding.

Last month, as Benson presided over a promotion ceremony, he urged firefighters never to disappoint the people who depend on them.

Afterward, he laughed about the smoke-filled crawl that started his career. It was only five minutes, he said. "But it seemed like forever."

### **Alvin Benson**

**Position:** Director, Memphis Fire Services

**Career:** Firefighter, 1987; fire inspector, 1994; fire prevention supervisor, 1998; fire marshal, 2002; deputy director, 2004; director, 2008

**Education:** Hamilton High, 1982; bachelor's in fire administration/fire prevention, University of Memphis, 2000; master's in business administration, Webster University, 2006

**Personal:** Wife Audrey, children Rachel, 21; Alexis, 16; Darius, 15; Cameron, 12

**You may not have known:** Benson, whose vocal range extends from baritone to tenor, often performs patriotic songs ("God Bless America," "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "God Bless the USA" are favorites) to kick off fire department events