An Argument for the 48/96 work schedule

The biggest argument on both sides of the 48/96 is rest and sleep. West Metro Fire in Colorado has done the only third party study using St. Anthony’s Hospital. The study shows that if done correctly (allowing naps when necessary, something officers in AFD are already allowed to do on a 24-hour shift) firefighters prefer the 48/96 because of the greater recovery time. The study states that while you may be slightly more fatigued on the end of your shift, the recovery time more than makes up for it. Firefighters working the 48/96 have stated that with their new schedule they feel that they can fully separate work and home life and that if they have a busy shift they can recover on their first day off and still have 3 days to spend with friends and family. This is called short term vs. long term fatigue. Short term fatigue (on duty fatigue) raises only slightly on the 48/96, but long term fatigue is dramatically reduced. Long-term fatigue can be defined as the accumulation of fatigue without adequate rest periods that lasts over weeks, months, or longer. This type of fatigue is more hazardous to employees in emergency services than short-term fatigue because the body is less able to compensate for the lack of rest than with short-term fatigue. There is also evidence that shows a greater correlation between long term fatigue and PTSD and job burnout. The danger associated with the 24/48 schedule is that it promotes long-term fatigue due to a lack of recovery time. When we work 48 hours on our current schedule, we only have 24 hours to recover, and we never have a break longer than 48 hours unless we take a shift off. More than 200 fire departments have found the solution to long term fatigue to be the 48/96 schedule. It's been reported by firefighters who work the 48/96, that the biggest advantage to the schedule is the reduction in long term fatigue.

Yes, shifts will be run a little differently. Most departments currently running a 48/96 try to front load their non-emergency duties. This means your company attempts to do its apartment inspections, preplans, hydrants, detector installs and other chores on the first day. Allowing for activities that are more flexible on the second day. This way if you have a rough night, you don’t have to worry about a hard schedule on day two. This doesn’t mean nothing gets done on day two. It simply allows for more flexibility. Many companies allow for their guys to rest in the morning of day two before going out and doing company drills on the second day. As far as required hands on training through ed services, sometimes it will have to be done on the second day. However, a lot of departments try to get their busiest units (18s, 17s, 8s, and centrals) scheduled for first day required training.

The 48/96 work schedule was thought up initially on the west coast in order to allow firefighters, who couldn’t afford to live in the city they worked for, to live
further out and escape high home prices and taxes. Unfortunately, Austin is getting more expensive every day. The average home in Austin costs $360,000. While there are many firefighters who live in Austin, new firefighters tend to either rent or move to the suburbs in order to afford the cost of living. But, the suburbs are getting more expensive too. We are already among the highest paid in the state of Texas, but to think that our salaries are going to raise equally with the cost of living in Austin is unlikely. With a 48/96, firefighters have more of a choice in where they would like to live and raise a family. It should be thought of as an extra benefit, allowing you to take your hard earned AFD salary and spend it wherever you would like even if that means living two hours away on a big piece of property that you couldn’t afford anywhere near Austin.

Other benefits include:

1. More complete weekends off work. With the 48/96 schedule, the firefighter is completely off 3 out of every 6 weekends (Sat & Sun) as opposed to being off only 1 out of every 3 weekends under the current 24-48 schedule. Therefore, the firefighter is completely off 50% of their weekends instead of only 33%. Furthermore, with the 48/96 schedule, the firefighter gets eighteen 4-day weekends (Thurs-Sun or Fri-Mon) per year. Under our current schedule, firefighters never get a 4-day weekend without taking a shift off.

2. Maximizes vacation/sick leave. Every time the firefighter gets off work, they are going home to a 4-day break. The 48/96 schedule provides five 4-day off periods each month versus ten 2-day off periods. That's sixty 4-day off periods per year. Furthermore, the 24/48 schedule only allows the firefighter 1 night out of every 3 to spend time with family members or attend social events, free of worries about preparing for work the next day. By comparison, the 48/96 schedule provides 3 evenings out of every 6 days for the firefighter to enjoy spending time with family or friends without having to worry about getting ready for work the next day. Firefighters working the 24/48 schedule often complain that they waste their first day off recovering from a busy shift the night before. Then they only have 1 day left to spend with their families or finish a project. Firefighters on the 48/96 schedule report that they are able to use their first day off as a recovery day if they need to and are still able to enjoy 3 full days with their families. Many firefighters also state that they use less vacation time simply because their trips and planned activities can be done on the time that they already have off. Also when you do use sick or vacation, you are not required to take off a complete 48 hours. You will be allowed to just take one 24 hours shift off if that’s what is needed.

3. More mornings at home. The number of mornings that a firefighter wakes up at home and is not traveling to or from work increases from 10 per month to 15 per month with the 48/96 schedule. On the current 24/48 schedule, a firefighter only has 1 free morning (not traveling to or from work) out of every 3 days (33%). On the other hand, the 48/96 schedule provides 3 free mornings out of every 6 days (50%). That provides more opportunities to take your kids to school, sleep in, or get an early start on a project. This can also be very beneficial to a firefighter who watches their kids on their days off while their spouse goes to work.

4. Cuts commute in half. One of the most obvious benefits to the 48/96 work schedule is the fact that it cuts the firefighter’s commute in half. With our current schedule, firefighters drive to work 122 times a year. On the 48/96 schedule, the firefighter only drives to work 61 times a year (5 times per month). Reducing your commute by 50% cuts your fuel cost in half, saves wear and tear on your vehicle, and eliminates time that is wasted driving your car. Based on a 20 mile commute you would gain an extra 61 hours per year (2 1/2 days)!
5. Positive environmental effect. The 48/96 schedule clearly provides a positive impact on the environment. Roughly 300 vehicles are removed from the road every other day, which would obviously reduce traffic congestion and air pollution. Based on a 20-mile commute, 1200 miles of commuting would be removed every other day. This would have a tremendous impact on the amount of air pollution that is produced each year.

6. Cost savings for the city. I have conservatively estimated that a 48/96 could save the city a minimum of 50k per year in shift change added time. That is assuming there is one 15-minute holdover at half our stations every shift. Which as we know is probably a very low estimation.

Also, if you use West Metro sick time statistics as a constant and applied it to our department you could save approximately 600k a year in sick time. That doesn't even include the overtime that then gets paid to cover. Also, that is a conservative estimate, and with our culture of vacation and sick, I expect it to be over 1 million.

7. An unexpected positive side effect of the 48/96 was child custody. Many firefighters say that they get to see their children more often on this schedule. With the 24/48 many firefighters felt that they ended up only seeing their kids 1 out of every 3 days. However, on the 48/96 they see their kids 3 out of every 6 days.

8. Reoccurring daily chores (station clean up and apparatus checks) can be cut in half. This allows for more time to train, do CE’s, or complete other station projects.

The strongest argument for the 48/96 is that no 24/48 department that has trialed the 48/96 schedule has voted to go back. Firefighters who work this schedule love it. The hardest part of this committee was trying to find firefighters who worked it and disliked it. I still have not spoken to one. We found many firefighters who initially voted against it but voted to keep it after they worked the trial period. I spoke to one retired firefighter who was initially against his department’s 48/96 transition. He told me that the 48/96 was the best thing his department ever did for him and probably lengthened his career. Orange County in California barely passed their vote to trial the 48/96 with just over 50% but after the trial it passed by over 96% voting yes. There are larger and busier departments than us, some with ambulances that have voted to keep the 48/96 schedule after a trial period. I believe that firefighters are all pretty much the same and AFD is no different. With all of the evidence, I believe we should at least be open to a trial period.

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