

Voiceover ([00:00](#)):

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Michael Taylor ([00:38](#)):

Welcome to the next episode of the Workplace Safety Review Podcast. Today's special guest is Mr. Samuel Peña, Fire Chief, Houston Fire Department. Chief is a 28-year veteran of the fire service and has been Chief of the Houston Fire Department since December 19th, 2016. Chief Peña leads the third-largest municipal fire departments in the country, with approximately 3,900 personnel and an annual budget of over \$559 million. Wow, that's incredible. He previously served three years, nine months as Fire Chief in El Paso, Texas. Chief Peña completed his paramedic training at Texas Tech University Health Science Center EMS Division in 1998.

([01:26](#)):

He served previously as Taskforce Leader for the El Paso Hazardous Materials Team and Special Rescue Team, Coordinator for the Combined Search and Rescue Mountain Rescue Team, Strategic Planning Chief, Public Information Office Training Chief, and Assistant Chief of Emergency Operations. Chief Peña has served in the City of Houston Unified Command, directing the Houston Fire Department assets during Hurricane Harvey, Tropical Storm Imelda, Tropical Storm Beta, Hurricane Nicholas, Winter Storm Yuri, Super Bowl LI, World Series 2017, 2019, 2021, and the Watson Grinding Explosion in 2020. Welcome, Chief.

Chief Samuel Peña ([02:17](#)):

Michael, thank you for having me on your show.

Michael Taylor ([02:19](#)):

Hey, we really appreciate you being on our show. Our audience is going to be thrilled to learn about emergency response from a fire chief's perspective. But before we get involved in that, one of the questions I have... I mean, obviously, your experience is incredible. I mean, you've been doing this for over 30 years. What you're in charge of right now is massive. What led you to get involved with emergency response many years ago?

Chief Samuel Peña ([02:47](#)):

Well, Michael, I mean, I wish I had a cool story to say that I always wanted to be a firefighter, and that's what led up to this, but really I think more than anything, my heart's been set on service, on helping others. I spent four years in the Air Force as well. When I separated from there, I went back to El Paso where I grew up. I was actually born in Los Angeles, California, but grew up in El Paso, Texas, and that's where my wife's family is from. We went back to El Paso. I had a wife and two kids and they like to eat every day, and so I needed something to do. I applied everywhere. The El Paso Fire Department was the first one to call.

([03:29](#)):

Look, everything happens for a reason. I truly believe that. But my focus has been in service. I think I learned that from my parents. My dad was a self-employed mechanic. A lot of the work he did was for our neighbors and people in the neighborhood. He always and my mom always had a helping hand for

those in need. I think that's where it originated from. The fire department has really provided me an opportunity to serve in that capacity and really to try to make a positive impact on my community.

Michael Taylor ([04:05](#)):

That's still a cool story, notwithstanding what you worked with. But can you help us, because I think most of our audience and us don't really know how the fire departments are structured. Can you walk us through the hierarchy and how that works? Just inform our audience what the hierarchy looks like?

Chief Samuel Peña ([04:26](#)):

Sure. Look, the majority of the fire departments, especially municipal fire departments, are structured in a similar fashion. The positions may be different, but it's all hierarchical. Usually, they have one fire chief or a commissioner that's in charge of the entire operation, all aspects of fire protection for that municipality. And then from there, it filters down. For example, the Houston Fire Department, I have executive assistant chiefs that report. Those are my direct reports. I have three of those. And then right below them, we have some assistant chiefs that help in the administration of the organization. And then from there, it branches out.

([05:09](#)):

Most fire departments, we really have a decentralized command structure because we run different platoons or shifts. Houston runs four shifts. We have 94 fire stations, and we split those 94, our service area, amongst 12 different districts. Each district on each shift has a district chief that's in charge of about four or five fire stations in that district. That's how we try to maintain a manageable span of control, so to speak. It all filters up. Ultimately, the responsibility for everything, even at the street level, it ends here at the fire chief's desk.

([05:53](#)):

We put a lot of emphasis and we give a lot of discretion and try to push as much of the authority down to where those decisions need to be made, which is at the ground level, at the street level.

Michael Taylor ([06:09](#)):

Chief, I know that with your department being as big as it is, how do you go about training your folks on a regular basis? Do you do that internally? Do you have outside third-parties come in? How do you go about doing that to keep your personnel fresh, if you will?

Chief Samuel Peña ([06:27](#)):

Right, right. We run about 1,000 calls for service each day, Michael. Any time 911 calls, chances are the Houston Fire Department's going to respond in some capacity, even for police type calls. You're exactly right. There's a lot of things that come up that we need to prepare our personnel for and train them, and safety is the primary focus of what we do. Training is a critical component of that aspect. We run our own fire academy as recruits come in. We'll recruit right off the street. We'll put them through a curriculum, certify them as an EMT and as a firefighter, and then we put them out on the street, where their continuing education is constant.

([07:11](#)):

A lot of that is done here on this department, through field training officers really that we have in each district that are focused on delivering certain materials, especially as things change or new equipment or new procedures are implemented. We push those down to be delivered at the district level. But the

majority of the work and the experience really comes on the job. We put a lot of responsibility on our company officers to maintain our personnel safe and to ensure that they're training to provide an efficient and safe delivery of service.

[\(07:53\)](#):

Because a lot of times, it's self-preservation for those officers to ensure that they have firefighters that are properly trained, focused, and ready to serve at a moment's notice.

Michael Taylor [\(08:06\)](#):

You bet.

Adam [\(08:06\)](#):

Hey, Chief, you talked about training for your internal folks, but do you coordinate at all with private companies in Houston or obviously the surrounding areas to train them or to help them prepare for emergency response? How does that work exactly if you do?

Chief Samuel Peña [\(08:23\)](#):

No, absolutely. Absolutely, we do. We do that through a variety of delivery methods, Adam. One of them is, look, we have our public education office that reports to the fire marshal, who ultimately reports to the fire chief's office. That department, what they do is they go out and give basic safety classes to businesses in our community, safety classes, fire extinguishers, evacuation classes, some hands-only CPR, those types of things that would really translate into being a force multiplier for safety.

[\(09:03\)](#):

Because if we have trained personnel, if our community at least knows what to do in the initial stages of an emergency, then that helps not only the patients or those who may need help, but it also helps the fire department as they arrive, in that they're not arriving at a scene that hasn't had any attention to it. A little bit of self-preservation. But beyond that, we also have our hazmat unit that's part of the fire department. They do inspections and education to some of the hazardous materials companies that exist in our communities.

[\(09:45\)](#):

Through legislation and requirements for reporting and certain products and equipment that companies manage, we have an obligation to go out there and inspect those facilities. As part of the inspection, we also take the opportunity to, one, not only find out what inventory those companies have, but to provide some training as far as safety handling of certain components. Everything is about safety. As I mentioned, we run about 1,100 calls for service each day. It's a busy system. Anything that we can do to provide information and education to our community eventually helps us as well.

Michael Taylor [\(10:33\)](#):

Right. Chief Peña, I've been practicing OSHA law for almost 20 years now, and I've seen a lot of incidents and catastrophic events. The theme that keeps occurring over and over again is I ask folks, "Well, what's your emergency response plan," and it's always called 911. And then the fire department is like, well, it would've been nice if we had coordinated beforehand because you have unique conditions and unique hazards and have them come out and work together and coordinate and develop an emergency preparedness plan so that everybody's prepared once you have to react.

Chief Samuel Peña ([11:20](#)):

Sure, absolutely. It helps everybody. A lot of times we're invited especially at construction sites because we also manage the heavy rescue, technical rescue response for our community. If we get an opportunity to go out to some of these construction sites and see what's going on, especially if we're invited to be part of the development of their safety plan, a lot of times we can spot things based on what we've seen in the past that end up causing an issue. It is about employee safety and worker safety. We would love nothing more than for our services never to have to be used, but we know that things happen.

([12:03](#)):

Planning is critical. We do that type of I don't want to say consulting because that's not what it is, but if we're asked to come in to help develop a plan, a lot of times we know what to prepare for, what type of operation a certain company's going to be conducting. We can help ourselves by starting to prepare with either equipment or certain training that we may not have at the moment. But that type of collaboration between the response agencies and companies is critical for the safety of our community.

([12:43](#)):

A lot of times we don't consider the impacts of natural disasters or the weather or sometimes man-made things that can happen in an operation. We may have something to offer in that we've responded to certain things. A lot of times those are blind sides that the company may not have considered.

Adam ([13:05](#)):

Hey, chief, speaking of a hurricane or natural disaster versus maybe a catastrophic release, from your perspective, how is responding to say a catastrophic explosion, for instance, different if at all from responding to... I mean, you've unfortunately had to deal with hurricanes and floods and things like that. Is there any difference there?

Chief Samuel Peña ([13:29](#)):

There is a difference, Adam, in that you have a... For example, let's take an explosion in a company. We know that there's going to be a definite endpoint and we have certain processes that we know that we have to walk through to get to that mitigation stage. The difference between that and a natural disaster, especially a hurricane or an example of the freeze that we had in 2021, is that you really don't know when it's going to end, right? The pandemic has been a glaring example of that. Because even a hurricane, you get weather updates and you say, "Okay, we're expecting another day or two of this."

([14:13](#)):

The pandemic was really a hurricane that lasted for over two years. You have to approach this differently, those types of incidents, those undetermined. When there's no real timeframe that you're working under, you have to approach them differently because you have to plan for long range. How are you going to keep your crews rotated? How are you going to keep them supplied? How are you going to keep them rested and rotated? All those things are considerations that normally we don't have to consider at a house fire, even if it's a major hazmat. We know that it'll be a day at the most and we can plan for that.

([14:58](#)):

We're deployed and we're prepared for those types of responses to go in there, address the issue, and then get back in service. These long-term disasters or issues that are sustained over a long period of time are more challenging for us, in that our folks may also be dealing with the same issue that's

affecting the community. All those things bring a different dynamic, different dimensions into our planning process.

Michael Taylor ([15:34](#)):

Chief, does your department coordinate with Pasadena and the Ship Channel, for example, regarding hurricanes, that kind of stuff?

Chief Samuel Peña ([15:46](#)):

No, we do, Mike. We have mutual aid agreements with the majority of the ESDs or other departments in the county and the surrounding counties. One of the things that 9/11, and we just celebrated the 21st anniversary of 9/11, but one of the things that 9/11 and Harvey taught us is that even the largest departments in the country at some point may need help. It's important for us to have those relationships established and some framework, we talked about planning, it applies to us too, to have some framework where we can call in additional resources or we can be available to other municipalities or jurisdictions to be able to provide some assistance with resources that we may have.

([16:35](#)):

The answer to your question, Michael, is yes, we do coordinate with them. Our hazmat unit is regional, so oftentimes we go out and deploy out into the county. Sometimes we deploy just to provide some coverage while their primary units is handling the incident. That's how we work together and I think it's important to our community. We are one community. I think our community requires us and expects us to be able to do that.

Michael Taylor ([17:03](#)):

That's for sure. From the sounds of it, you sure do stay busy. I wonder if you get sleep.

Chief Samuel Peña ([17:13](#)):

You know what? I'm the champion of cat naps, man. If I get a chance, I'll close my eyes for a couple minutes and we're good.

Michael Taylor ([17:24](#)):

You got that down, Right? Last question, Chief, can you talk to our audience about some of the most interesting or memorable emergency responses in which you've been involved over the years and maybe describe some lessons learned from those responses?

Chief Samuel Peña ([17:45](#)):

Well, look, I can point to six named storms that I've had since I've been here in Houston. I came from El Paso at the end of 2016 and we've had six named storms that we've had to deal with. Aside from that, we've had the ongoing pandemic. Those have been really challenging for our personnel. They've been dynamic in the issues that they've brought forth and have presented. But man, you know what? My hat is off to everybody in the fire service. I mean as an industry, these men and women are problem solvers. I cannot say enough about their ingenuity and what they bring to the table.

([18:32](#)):

But for me in particular, the responses or the incidents that have really stayed with me throughout my career are those that affect individuals and make a positive impact in that. I remember when I was a

paramedic in the City of El Paso early in my career, we made an incident, a response. It came in as a obstetrics call. We showed up to the scene and the baby had delivered already, the young mother. The baby had delivered already. We had to do CPR on the infant. We did CPR on the infant, delivered it to the hospital, her, because it was a female baby. We delivered the baby to the hospital. Before I left the City of El Paso, that female had graduated high school.

[\(19:34\)](#):

Those are things that really stay with you, and it really solidifies the impact that our first responders have on their community. There are people walking around in our communities that are here because of the interventions that our first responders, police officers, EMTs, firefighters have made on our community. That's really what I think for me even in challenging times has kept me going is that I know that just by certain interventions, just by our willingness to step in and try to make a difference, we are making an impact. I think that's kept me going for almost 30 years, and I hope to be able to do this a few more years.

Michael Taylor [\(20:21\)](#):

We hope so too, Chief. We thank you so much for your service and your commitment to the public and it's very much appreciated.

Chief Samuel Peña [\(20:30\)](#):

Hey, well, thank you, guys, for what you're doing and bringing attention to the need to properly plan and prepare, right? Because that a lot of times avoids emergencies too that may happen.

Michael Taylor [\(20:42\)](#):

You bet. Absolutely. Thank you again for being on our show. We really appreciate it. For those of you out there, stay tuned for the next episode of the Workplace Safety Review Podcast. Stay safe out there, everybody.