

Initiative

15

Advocacy must be strengthened for the enforcement of codes and the installation of home fire sprinklers.

Executive Summary

The term “fire prevention,” as used here, means the acts necessary to prevent accidental fires from starting and, when they do start, methods to minimize their growth prior to human intervention. A successful effort in fire prevention will mean fewer fire responses by firefighters because of a reduction in fires, and less dangerous working conditions on the fire ground as a result of smaller, contained fires. With fewer fire responses and smaller, contained fires, it is clear that there will be fewer firefighter injuries and fatalities – which is the goal of our overall efforts. The 15th Initiative asks us to advocate for stronger codes and laws which will decrease the number and severity of structural & residential fires to keep our firefighters out of harm’s way.

Historical Perspective

When we read or hear from experts regarding the state of fire safety in the United States, we hear that we’ve done a terrible job of preventing fires, and are chastised for the resulting injuries and deaths. We hear everything from comparisons with other countries (with substantially different cultures) to claims that the fire service hasn’t embraced prevention techniques, to cries about changes in technology resulting in more dangerous buildings. While these arguments have an element of truth to them, they all ignore the fact that Americans are safer today from fire than at any time in our history. So, before we criticize ourselves too harshly, let’s pause to acknowledge those who have brought about these positive changes before we plan the next phase of work to enhance public safety even further.

Consider the following:

- In 2005, the number of fires was almost exactly half the number in 1977 (1,602,000 in 2005; 3,264,000 in 1977¹).
- Civilian deaths in 1977 were 7,395; in 2005, 3,675
- Firefighter fatalities in 1977 were 157; in 2005, 87

During the last four decades, the number of fires has decreased fifty percent; the number of civilian injuries and fatalities have been reduced a similar amount, and the number of firefighter fatalities has dropped about 45 percent between 1977 and 2005 (although the most recent data indicate that the trend indicates about 100 firefighters lose their lives in the line of duty annually). While these statistics appear encouraging, it's important to note that the trend curves have flattened to the point that little, if any, progress has been made during the last ten to fifteen years (the annual number of firefighter fatalities has hovered around 100 over this period, excluding the World Trade Center disaster). By chance or by design, this reduction and subsequent flattening roughly follows the initial "America Burning" report (published in 1974), which resulted in a focus on public education from the fire service, and the introduction and widespread use of smoke alarms in homes (commonly accepted to have begun occurring in the mid 1970's). It is widely believed that these efforts have resulted in the significant reductions in residential fire fatalities in the United States. Once "market saturation" was reached with smoke alarms, and public education programs became routine, the flattening began.

It remains to be seen whether the most recently commissioned "America Burning" and the efforts by the National Fallen Firefighters' Foundation will have a similar impact in reducing the number of fires, injuries, and fatalities. This paper is an effort to provide information, concepts, and recommendations as to identification and implementation of measures to effect a sharp reduction in firefighter fatalities through fire prevention.

Recommendation # 1: *Read America Burning (1973) and the subsequent America At Risk (2002) to gain excellent historical insight into the fire prevention efforts this country has undertaken over the past three decades.*

What Is

First of all, fire prevention is not rocket science; the issues have been studied, effective strategies identified, and, in some cases, implemented. Major papers have been assembled by leading experts that provide somewhat of a road map to success. The most recent report, entitled "America at Risk (America Burning Recommissioned)" was published in 2002, and included a "report card" based upon the recommendations of the original "America Burning" study that was released in 1973. Based upon this report card, we have scored miserably—we did not achieve a passing grade where prevention efforts are concerned. So, what's the problem? What are the persistent behaviors which block us from having a safer

built environment?

We have studies that provide clear direction to the fire service and the public; we have public education strategies that have shown great promise; we have sprinkler technology that is driving down the cost of these systems, which almost everyone agrees would have an enormous impact on our fire loss rate. We have smoke alarm programs in many communities to assure early warning in case a fire starts; we have programs to teach children how to be safe at home, and how to escape in case of fire; we have building codes that are providing for safer and safer buildings. So, what's the problem?

The single greatest barrier to reducing fire loss in the United States, including firefighter line of duty deaths, is that the leadership in this country, both elected and appointed, does not understand the value of fire prevention to their communities. Stated another way, they don't realize the cost of fire to their constituents. The Report on *America at Risk* put it this way:

The lack of public understanding about the fire hazard is reflected in the continued rate of loss of life and property. The efforts of local fire departments to educate children and others must intensify. Without the integrated efforts of

all segments of the community, including city and county managers, mayors, architects, engineers, researchers, academics, materials producer and the insurance industry, as well as the fire service, there is little reason to expect that a proper appreciation of the critical role played by the fire service will materialize, in which case the necessary funding will continue to be lacking.

Based upon these conclusions, this paper will not focus on traditional fire prevention strategies, sometimes called the three "E's" – Education, Engineering, and Enforcement. Rather, it will focus on methodologies to enhance the understanding of stakeholders outside the traditional fire prevention groups – politicians, administrators, media, and others. A three step process is proposed as follows:

What Can Be

Step 1: Get Our Own House In Order

The fire service has enhanced its professionalism in many areas – chief officers are being recognized through the Center for Public Safety Excellence (formerly CFAI); fire departments are seeking accreditation; leadership positions are now requiring higher levels of education than ever before; specialized areas of response including emergency medical services, hazardous materials responders, technical rescue responders, etc. are requiring greater levels of training, education, and certification.

Given these trends, why is it that, in many communities, a firefighter can be assigned directly from a suppression role to a fire prevention role with little or no

additional training? Many times, well intended firefighters are placed in the untenable position of becoming a fire code official overnight. Without proper training, (and documentation of that training), this person is doomed to lose the credibility she brings to the position as a uniformed firefighter. Fire suppression training and experience provide unique and valuable insight into the role of fire and building code regulator; however, this role also requires a deep knowledge of the principles that the regulations are built upon, and a comprehensive understanding of the technical aspects of fire protection systems, both passive and active.

Recommendation #2: *As a beginning step, anyone posted to the position of fire inspector should be trained to assume that position through completing and obtaining a national certification such as International Code Council's Fire Inspector Certification or NFPA's Fire Prevention Specialist Certification.*

Even worse than moving a firefighter into a fire prevention position with no additional training, is the practice of some communities who hire fire inspectors with no background in the fire service and then provide little or no training. There have even been state fire marshals that were installed as a political favor to those with few legitimate qualifications to serve as the chief fire prevention officer for an entire state.

Recommendation # 3: *No one should be promoted to the position of fire inspector or fire marshal without requisite training and experience. Documentation of a person's knowledge to perform the duties of fire inspector or fire marshal may be acquired by achieving one or more of the certifications offered by the International Code Council or NFPA. These are nationally accepted, accredited certification programs that attest to the certificate holder's knowledge of the requirements to perform competently.*

The solution to these problems is for the fire service, (especially our leadership) to accept the role of fire prevention as a core competency of our profession. This means that fire prevention specialists must receive the advanced training necessary to understand the technical, fundamental, and political aspects of their role. They should be technically competent in the codes they are applying, should have a clear understanding of the fundamentals of fire dynamics, smoke movement, heat transfer, etc., and they need a support infrastructure to allow them to operate with relative independence from the political body, or should be included in the pertinent discussions with the political leadership. The days of the mayor calling the fire chief to demand relief for a particular constituent from fire code enforcement should be gone forever. Unfortunately, it will continue as long as the mayor believes that our fire prevention efforts are simply a revenue source, and that they are a barrier to development in the community.

Fire service leadership must recognize the specialized training necessary for fire prevention officers, both the beginning and throughout all phases of career

development. Through leadership organizations, including the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF), and the National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM), recognition of existing professional development programs can easily be established; identification of new programs through a comprehensive analysis of the needed assets needed for a fire prevention specialist to be successful would find a market willing and capable of providing training and certification to meet the need; fire service leadership will need to demand and fund enhanced professional development of fire prevention resources.

A coalition of IAFC, NASFM, IAFF and other fire service leadership organizations should appoint a commission to research existing programs and, for relevant programs, provide full support through public endorsement and recognition. Where existing programs don't exist to fill the need for educating, training, and certifying fire prevention specialists, this commission should document the need and either develop the programs, or reach out to other organizations to do so. Members of this commission will have relationships with organizations that are attempting to fulfill this need, and should be able to leverage those relationships to assure a successful migration to appropriate, comprehensive training and certification of fire prevention personnel.

Recommendation # 4: *Within one year of its commissioning, a coalition of IAFC, NASFM, and IAFF experts should reach consensus regarding the state of prevention-oriented training in the United States, identifying any gaps which exist, and make recommendations for the advancement of national level standards.*

Step 2: Engage the Political Leadership:

Fire Chiefs must have the support of elected leaders in their community in order to be successful regarding code development and implementation. In most cases, fire chiefs are typically either appointed or affirmed by the elected leadership. Chiefs, therefore, have a degree of influence with the elected body of their communities.

How this influence is utilized, or leveraged, will determine success in the area of prevention. Because we all realize that, like a revolver, the chief has a finite number of shots at success, she must choose the department's priorities carefully, making sure that those established by the fire department provide the greatest level of safety for the community. In setting priorities for the fire department, fire prevention should logically be identified as the most cost effective strategy to reduce the cost of unwanted fire in a community.

Recommendation # 5: *Fire Chiefs, local fire marshals, and all prevention specialists within a department should establish mission-related goals which clearly identify code development and enforcement as one of the organization's highest priorities.*

Once the priority has been established, selling the political leadership is no different than any other proposal the chief might make – whether it is a new station, more firefighters, new fire trucks, or an effective prevention program, the process is the same. A well informed politician can become the department’s most passionate advocate. Attitudes that fire prevention activities are a waste of resources; that they are barriers to development; that it’s just another “bureaucracy” can be overcome by providing accurate information to those in a decision making capacity. Here, open, honest discussions must take place. If there are shortcomings in the fire prevention system, they need to be identified and addressed openly; if fire prevention personnel are not perceived to be an important part of the fire department that must change—internally as well as externally. If, on the other hand, misperceptions have been allowed to flourish, then accurate information, conveyed in a timely fashion, will eventually prevail.

Recommendation # 6: *Communication between the fire department and elected officials must be periodic and honest regarding the state of prevention in the community.*

In addition to local efforts, where successes will come one at a time, there is a need to engage the national organizations whose members make up the local and state leadership teams. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation should form a coalition of fire service leadership associations to engage the International City Managers Association, the National League of Cities, National Governors Association, National Association of County Administrators, and other associations that provide access to our elected and appointed leadership. Once the coalition is formed, issues of importance to the fire service could be aired in regular meetings with these groups, including the fire prevention messages we need to convey. Since most of these associations have offices in the District of Columbia, face to face meetings would be relatively easy, providing opportunities for the Foundation to promote firefighter safety as a cost saving issue for local and state governments.

Recommendation # 7: *At the highest level of national fire service leadership, assemble a coalition of stakeholder organizations to present prevention material and needs-assessments to elected and appointed leadership at the state and federal levels.*

Step 3: Bringing it Home:

Once the appropriate support infrastructure is in place, it’s time to implement strategies and tactics to achieve the greatest results. Within our local settings, every effort should be made to make fire prevention a community responsibility, not something that happens one week in October. Fire departments, for their part, must continue to push for innovative public education programs focusing on the prevention of fires, including heating and cooking safety, electrical safety, etc. In addition, we should continue to enhance programs that include

smoke alarms and sprinkler technology so that these interventions become the norm.

Recommendation # 8: *Create partnerships with educational agencies and institutions to deliver realistic information to students (K-12) that will be enthusiastically received. Material aimed at adults, especially homeowners, should be developed to support local initiatives (residential sprinklers, smoke alarm installation; home escape plans, etc.) and; partnerships with local advertising agencies and media outlets should be utilized to adult-aimed prevention messages. Other educational offerings delivered to unique audiences, especially high-risk audiences, may be developed on the appropriate level (local, state, national) depending upon the demographics of these groups.*

It is time to re-examine the role of fire department inspectors and plan reviewers in the hierarchy of our organizations, as well as in the community at large. Inspectors and plan reviewers provide a valuable service to citizens (customers) in terms of business continuity achieved through safety.

Recommendation # 9: *Only as a last resort should enforcement personnel actually need to “enforce” the codes; with good training, and a solid understanding of the principles of fire protection, they should be able to communicate the advantages of compliance in such a way that the customer complies without threats or coercion. Voluntary compliance is a longer lasting solution, because if the customer understands and buys into the principles, he will continue safe practices long after the inspector leaves the premises.*

Finally, fire departments will go far in elevating the importance of fire prevention when they recognize it as a core competency all members must possess. All fire department employees should be trained in proactive prevention programs they can deliver to the community. Prevention specialists must be hired, trained and certified to deploy the most advanced technology-based systems to customers with complex environments, such as businesses, schools, lodging establishments, restaurants and others.

Recommendation # 10: *Once a fire department recognizes fire prevention as a core part of its business, it should reach out to all those in the community who have a stake in improving the built environment, including building inspectors (they see a lot of new construction before anyone in the fire department knows anything about it), attorneys who represent the jurisdiction, and community groups who need to understand importance of prevention. Help them to understand that virtually every time a fire occurs in a community, there was a breakdown in the fire protection system somewhere along the way.*

Conclusion

We will continue to suffer losses of life and property from fire in this country until fire prevention efforts are more fully recognized, accepted, and funded. As long as our elected and appointed leaders have a negative opinion of fire

prevention activities, or, at a minimum, don't recognize prevention as an important part of the solution, we will suffer from under-funded, under-staffed, under-trained, under-prepared and under-performing fire prevention efforts. We must raise the awareness of the positive aspects of fire prevention throughout our communities in order to take the next step in reducing firefighter fatalities.

Recommendations

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