

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

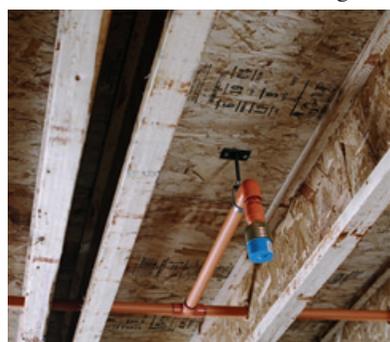


Today’s fire service is complex, with many competing aspects. In 2010, U.S. fire departments responded to over 1.33 million fire calls and 18.5 million medical aid calls (NFPA 2011). There were nearly 2.2 million false alarms reported. These selected call data illustrate the increasing public safety challenge faced by communities. Too often emergency response is not just the primary focus of a fire department, but the sole focus.

A “systems approach” to fire department services. In his book series, *When in Doubt, Lead!*, Chief Dennis Compton (retired from Mesa, Arizona) uses the analogy of a three-legged stool to explain the importance of a balanced department fire and life safety mission (the seat of the stool). The three “legs” support the mission: Fire Prevention, Emergency Response, and Public Education. “Managers today must pay attention to all components of the fire and life safety equation, avoiding the temptation to focus only on areas within which they have expertise or interest, or that are politically popular.”

The goal to increase awareness of home fire sprinklers should be a focus of every fire department. The installation of fire sprinklers in one- and two-family dwellings saves lives of civilians and first responders and improves the overall quality of a community’s housing stock. Starting with fire service leadership, all department personnel should be encouraged to become conversant with home fire sprinkler installation (NFPA 13D systems).

Code enforcement/advocacy and prevention education should be recognized as core competencies of the U.S. fire service. The “Fire Service Needs Assessment” survey from NFPA documented the problem of lacking code inspections (nearly 7,000 departments) in rural communities. According to a national survey of fire chiefs



(HSC/Johns Hopkins 2007), 85% of fire departments spend fewer than 10 hours on fire and life safety education and only 12 percent have personnel assigned exclusively to public education. Only 6 percent of those doing public education reported making home fire sprinklers a focus of local outreach.

Fire service personnel charged with education and prevention/code activities require training. It’s not sufficient to endorse the concept of fire department support of prevention and education activities. Fire service leadership should recognize the importance of specialized training throughout all phases of a career and empower personnel to obtain it. The National Fire Academy

has introduced free online distance learning covering a wide range of fire service topics. In 2010, the Home Safety Council launched the Expert Network Academy, a free online training program for fire and life safety educators.

Each department must emphasize fire and life safety education within the community. Progressive departments will make awareness of home fire sprinklers a focus of their outreach. Public educators in the fire service should create partnerships with educational agencies and institutions to deliver realistic information about fire sprinklers to both children and adults – especially homeowners. The Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition (HFSC) launched its Built for Life Fire Department program specifically to increase the number of fire departments teaching about sprinklers.



The program balances department recognition with outreach, tools and training – all at no cost.

Resources abound to help fire departments improve public safety through sprinkler education and awareness efforts. It starts with the understanding and acceptance that home fire sprinkler systems are the fire department’s partner in fire suppression.

No other technology can protect first responders like fire sprinklers can. Fire sprinklers decrease the number and severity of structural and residential

fires, creating less dangerous working conditions on the fire ground and preventing civilian and firefighter injuries and fatalities.

A bit of sprinkler history. The landmark *America Burning* report published in 1973 recognized the tremendous potential that fire

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INCREASED USE OF RESIDENTIAL FIRE SPRINKLERS WILL REDUCE FIRE LOSS FOR CIVILIANS AND DECREASE FIREFIGHTER INJURIES AND DEATHS ON THE FIRE GROUND.

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sprinkler technology has to reduce the nation’s fire death problem. In that same year, NFPA’s Committee on Automatic Sprinklers appointed a subcommittee to prepare the *Standard on the Installation of Sprinkler Systems in One- and Two-Family Dwellings and Mobile Homes*, which was adopted in 1975. The standard has evolved to become the current NFPA 13D.

Support for fire sprinkler technology. The U.S. fire service has long played an important role in advocating for fire sprinkler protection. This unified support was evident most recently when a strong fire service contingent helped ensure a requirement for sprinklers in townhouses and one- and two-family dwellings remained in the International Code Council’s (ICC) International Residential Code.

TEACHING POINTS

CHALLENGE

The onus is on the fire service. We must take responsibility for improving our knowledge of fire and building codes within the community, as well as the roles codes play in protecting civilians and firefighters. It’s also our job to help the public understand the importance of these codes, just as we educate about home fire safety basics (early detection, escape planning and practice, and most importantly, fire sprinklers). This challenge is complicated by the aforementioned budget and personnel restraints that affect most fire departments coupled with an aggressive anti-sprinkler-requirement contingent which has been at work at all levels to undermine the progress made in sprinkler ordinances and codes. Myths and other inaccurate information may impact the opinions of homeowners, business owners and builders who are concerned about the costs of installing fire sprinklers. Education must be consistent and ongoing to overcome these misconceptions.

DISCUSSION

- **Does your department’s mission statement include Fire Prevention, Emergency Response, and Public Education? Are home fire sprinklers considered a shared value among department personnel?**
- **Do you make home fire sprinkler education a focus of your community outreach?**
- **What are your fire district’s/municipality’s fire and building codes? Do all members of the fire service understand those codes?**
- **Does your fire district/municipality have a residential and/or commercial fire sprinkler ordinance?**
- **Are there any sprinklered homes in your community? Do the owners of those sprinklered homes receive information that describes the fire sprinkler system and how it works?**
- **Are fire sprinklers a topic of discussion within community fire safety and prevention programs as well as fire department public relations?**
- **Do you reach out to the homebuilding community to overturn myths and increase awareness? Do you contact real estate and home insurance professionals in addition to builders?**
- **Does your fire district/municipality use its newsletter, website or other media to promote fire sprinkler messaging?**
- **Is there a fire safety program being offered for children in local schools? Does it include a basic understanding of fire sprinkler technology?**
- **What can you do to enact Initiative #15 in your organization?**



For more information, please visit the Associated Fire Fighters of Illinois at: www.affi-iaff.org.



For more information, please visit www.everyonegoeshome.com.

Throughout the 16 Firefighter Life Safety initiatives there are opportunities for both organizational and personal change. As your department moves toward adopting a safety-minded culture, use the tools offered in the 16 initiatives as guiding documents.

Scan with your smartphone to sign up your fire district for the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition’s “Built For Life” Fire Department Program and receive a free water bottle



NFPA Fire Sprinkler Initiative: www.firesprinklerinitiative.org
 Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition: www.homefiresprinkler.org
 Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board: www.firesprinklerassoc.org