

Building Blocks of Advocacy

3 strategies to secure support for prevention



By Jim Crawford

As a national strategic planning process, Vision 20/20 (www.strategicfire.org) lays out a consensus approach to what we (collectively) should be working on to further reduce fire losses in the United States. There's nothing really *new* in Vision 20/20's recommended strategies, but it does reflect which actions we should prioritize now to make progress on the nation's fire problem. One of those strategies is advocating for fire prevention.

As I watch the discussion about advocacy unfold, I've come to believe there are three basic strategies necessary to create advocates for fire prevention efforts.

1. Demonstrate the Need: As my friend Wayne Powell once said: "No data, no problem; no problem, no money." Gathering data and talking about the need for fire prevention isn't as simple as talking about an estimated 3,500 fire deaths a year. That's why people like Richard Taylor from the State Fire Marshal's Office in Maine and Ozzie Mirkhah of Las Vegas have been talking about the *economic* losses from fire. Relating the scope of the fire problem in terms of money hits policymakers where they're already hurting.

Using NFPA reports on the topic, we can say that more than 2 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product is tied up in fire losses and the costs associated with providing fire protection. Those figures include costs of built-in protection and estimates for the costs of volunteer and professional firefighters. *The point:* We're losing too much of our economy to fire.

2. Demonstrate the Results: If we're not using the (mostly) public's money wisely, and are unable to provide evidence of results, then the same policymakers who are already feeling constraints from economic crises will find better ways to spend their money.

There are effective ways to document the impacts and outcomes for fire prevention efforts; a preliminary report is available on Vision 20/20's Web site. I'll save the details for another column.

3. Develop Relationships: Public policy theory stipulates that different political forces (basically, people) within the community end up influencing public policy decisions as to what's important and what's not.

Example: Mothers Against Drunk Driving's (MADD) very public efforts to bring attention to the problem of

intoxicated driving led to more stringent laws. Having friends in the community who understand the need for fire prevention programs can in turn help influence policymakers to appreciate their importance.

AN UPHILL BATTLE

These three strategies for advocating for prevention sound simple. Unfortunately, there are no surefire solutions, even when such strategies are implemented.

Recently, the State Fire Marshal's Office in Arizona was basically gutted of resources and programs due to severe budget woes. And in my own jurisdiction (Vancouver, Wash.) we recently lost a third of our staffing, which severely hampered our ability to provide adequate fire prevention services. To their credit, our fire chief, city council and city manager have protected fire and police budgets from cuts up until this point. But the Great Recession and its local impact have created a perfect economic storm from which we can no longer be protected.

However, lessons from states including Maryland and California make me think that the basic elements of effective advocacy haven't changed. Both states passed statewide regulations keeping residential fire sprinklers in their codes. When other states were losing the requirement in their base codes, Maryland and California were among those who maintained them because they spent years grooming the ground for favorable rulings from local policymakers. The lesson for other prevention personnel: It takes years to develop the strategies and relationships that protect prevention efforts.

The three basic building blocks—need, results and relationships—are still the best hope we have for advocacy of prevention programs. The fact is, even when we do things right, there are no sure things. The economy continues to give local decision-makers the unfortunate task of deciding whether to keep fire stations open or staff their fire prevention programs.

No small problem there. ☹️

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