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## THE CHICAGO FIRE DEPARTMENT: “STUCK ON STUPID”?

By Richard Schulte

On April 14, 2004, members of the fire service concerned about fire fighter safety convened for the very first Firefighter Life Safety Summit in Tampa, Florida. In April 2005, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) published a **NIOSH Alert** titled “*Preventing Injuries and Deaths of Fire Fighters due to Truss System Failures*” (NIOSH 2005-132). Since then, there have been several other meetings held addressing the issue of fire fighter safety. One of these meetings took place in Novato, California on March 3-4, 2007.

Excerpts from the report on the Novato meeting have been included in other recent articles on fire fighter safety on this website. The report not only summarizes what was discussed in Novato, but also includes an attendance list. Based upon the attendance list, roughly 200 people representing variance interests were at the meeting. Attendees included representatives from various fire departments, including:

- Anaheim (California) Fire Department
- Charlotte (North Carolina) Fire Department
- Cincinnati Fire Department
- FDNY
- Kansas City (Missouri) Fire Department
- Los Angeles Fire Department
- Montgomery County (Maryland) Fire Department
- Philadelphia Fire Department
- Phoenix Fire Department
- San Antonio Fire Department
- San Francisco Fire Department

In addition to the list of major city fire department representatives attending the meeting, representatives from smaller departments, such as the Bismarck (North Dakota) Fire Department and the Nashua (New Hampshire) Fire Rescue Department, also attended the meeting. State Fire Marshal Offices from four states, California, Florida, Georgia and New York also sent representatives to the meeting. Conspicuous by their absence were representatives from the Chicago Fire Department.

Eight days ago, at around 7 a.m. on December 22, 2010, the Chicago Fire Department responded to a nuisance fire in an abandoned building on Chicago's southeast side. Two fire fighters, Edward Stringer and Corey Ankum, were fatally injured and 17 other fire fighters were injured less severely when the trusses and roof deck of the one story building collapsed. At the time of the roof collapse, news reports indicated that there were four fire fighters in the building and fire fighters on the roof of the building.

Subsequent to initial reports on the fire, news sources indicated that the Chicago Building Department had cited the building owner in 2007 for building code violations, including the deteriorating structural capacity of the trusses and roof deck. These news sources further reported that the building owners' business in the building had failed and that the owner was financially unable to correct the code violations. Instead, the building owners "boarded up" the building.

The official explanation as to why fire fighters were sent into the building was that they were conducting a search of the building because it had been reported that the building was used by homeless people for shelter against the freezing temperatures in Chicago. No explanation was provided as to why fire fighters were on the roof of the building-rarely do homeless people take refuge against the cold on snow-covered roofs in Chicago.

Given the facts above, it seems reasonable to ask a number of questions:

- Would the two fire fighters who died as a result of a nuisance fire be alive today if the Chicago Fire Department had sent representatives to the meeting in Novato in March 2007?
- Would the two fire fighters who died on December 22<sup>nd</sup> be alive today if the Chicago Fire Department had heeded the recommendations contained in the **NIOSH Alert** on trusses, **NIOSH 2005-132**?
- Would the two fire fighters who died on December 22<sup>nd</sup> be alive today if the Chicago Fire Department had heeded the recommendations regarding fire fighting operations in abandoned buildings contained in the **NIOSH Alert** published in July 2010, *Preventing Deaths and Injuries of Fire Fighters using Risk Management Principles at Structure Fires* (**NIOSH 2010-153**)?
- Were fire department officers at the abandoned building aware that the Chicago Building Department had cited the owners of the building for a number of building code violations in 2007, including the deteriorating structural capacity of the trusses and roof deck, and that repairs of the building had never been made? If the answer to this question is no, why not? Pre-planning for a fire is part of the job of a fire department which employs paid professional fire fighters.

It would seem that the answers to the first three questions above are obvious. It is my opinion that the Chicago Fire Department failed to fulfill its responsibilities to protect both the safety of fire fighters in the department and the public (from litigation which is sure to ensue).

The report on the meeting in Novato makes reference to the “hero culture” in the fire service. While some will want to point the finger at the owners of the building for failure to maintain their property, it is well known in the fire service that abandoned buildings are “death traps”. A building owner who does not have the financial capability to keep his property in repair makes a good target for those looking for an excuse for what happened on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, but the economy is what it is. No doubt there are thousands of derelict buildings on the south and west side of Chicago which are in need of repair, but whose owners can’t afford to pay for repairs. Assessing thousands of dollars in fines for code violations doesn’t help an owner who is close to bankruptcy. Unlike government, the private sector can’t print money and the private sector can’t raise revenue simply by voting on some resolution.

Given that the building owner “boarded up” his building to prevent people from entering the building, it would seem that the homeless people in the building could also be blamed and certainly the unidentified individuals who were trespassing in the building bear the bulk of the responsibility for what happened, particularly if the homeless people ignited the fire. It doesn’t seem unreasonable that the building owner could be applauded for providing shelter for homeless people in winter.

In an ideal world, buildings owners would be sufficiently prosperous to be able to afford to maintain their buildings properly, but we don’t live in an ideal world. Hence, it is incumbent on the Chicago Fire Department to be aware of the conditions of the buildings to which it responds and to be cautious. Let me say once again, everybody in the fire service knows that abandoned buildings are “death traps”. The events which occurred on the morning of December 22<sup>nd</sup> just proved why the fire service refers to abandoned buildings as “death traps”.

The funeral of Firefighter Edward Stringer was held on Tuesday of this week. The funeral of Firefighter Corey Ankum was held today. If the Chicago Fire Department wasn’t 20 years behind the rest of the fire service, Stringer and Ankum would have been able to celebrate Christmas with their families (unless they were on duty on that day).

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In the private sector, Fire Commissioner Robert Hoff would have lost his job on December 23<sup>rd</sup>. There is no excuse for losing fire fighters in a nuisance fire in an abandoned building. Allowing the Fire Commissioner to remain on the job after the events of December 22<sup>nd</sup> just sends the message to the fire fighters of the CFD that nothing has really changed.

**Editor’s Note:** Richard Schulte is a 1976 graduate of the fire protection and safety engineering program at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago. Schulte worked as the fire protection engineer for the San Jose (California) Fire Department from 1980-1982. Schulte was named as one of ENR’s “Top 25 Newsmakers of 2004” by Engineering News-Record for his work on critiquing the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) investigation into the collapse of the World Trade Center towers on 9/11.

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