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THE SOUND OF FIRE PREVENTION WORKING

By Richard Schulte

“Do you hear that? [Silence-no sirens.] That’s the sound of fire prevention working.”

Retired Fire Marshal Tom Linkowski, Evanston Fire Department

The National Fallen Firefighter Foundation (NFFF) held a meeting referred to as a “Prevention Mini Summit” on January 13, 2007 in Washington, DC. The following are excerpts from the report from this meeting:

“This interim summit on prevention was held in Washington D.C., to explore the relationships between fire prevention efforts and the goal of reducing firefighter injuries and fatalities.”

“The number one priority of the prevention group was to raise the role of prevention and public education within fire service organizations.”

“Elevate the role of the fire and life safety education (FLSE) within fire departments.”

“Integrate prevention and education fully into recruit training—every member of the department should be able to respond to a request for a prevention program.”

“Advocate codes that address firefighter safety including the requirement for the installation of home sprinkler systems. Develop a long-term implementation strategy for fire sprinklers and effective smoke alarms in residential occupancies.”

“Educate the fire service regarding sprinklers.”

“Work with community leaders to overcome misperceptions [misconceptions] about firefighter safety, codes, standards and sprinklers.”

“The number one priority of the prevention group was to raise the role of prevention and public education within fire service organizations.”

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“Residential fire sprinkler technology has come of age and proven its worth in potentially saving the lives of citizens and firefighters. Goal is to advertise how a drop in residential fires helps save firefighters’ lives.”

“Work with political leaders, building officials, manufactures, and media, among others to overcome any misconceptions about residential sprinklers.”

“Encourage all fire departments to train all members, at all levels, in the positive aspects of residential sprinklers.”

“Analyze all fire fatality incidents to determine if building code issues or lack thereof contributed to the cause of death.”

“Effective education and training of current and future fire service personnel is necessary to create and maintain safe firefighters, supervisors, managers and leaders. Occupational health is a multi[-]disciplinary field that requires all persons to have comprehensive training and education.”

“Evaluate effective methods of changing behaviors and attitudes of stakeholders regarding fire safety—focus on quantifiable statistics and statistical methodologies to learn about attitudes and behaviors.”

“Research influence of fire on modern building materials & construction methods as related to firefighter survivability.”

Discussion

The excerpts above are an interesting commentary on the mind set of today’s fire service.

It would seem like common sense that fire prevention should be the primary mission of the fire service. After all, preventing a fire, or mitigating the effects of a fire in a building is the most effective and efficient means of preventing both civilian and fire fighter casualties. Clearly, the commentary above implies that fire prevention “plays second fiddle” to suppression in most fire departments.

The commentary above includes the statement that the fire service should be educated “*regarding sprinklers*”. This statement, of course, implies that the fire service is presently not up to speed on sprinkler protection. Given the effectiveness of sprinkler protection in preventing both fire fatalities and fire injuries, it seems reasonable to ask why the fire service has neglected learning about the most effective means of controlling fire in our arsenal. In this day, to say that the fire service is not really familiar with how sprinkler protection works is an embarrassing admission.

The commentary above also includes the statement that “*effective methods of changing behaviors and attitudes of stakeholders regarding fire safety*” needs to be evaluated. Perhaps the reason why “*stakeholders*” do not take fire safety very seriously is that the fire service itself does not take building fire safety very seriously. After a certificate of occupancy is issued for a new building, the fire service is typically tasked with the enforcement of the maintenance provisions contained in the fire prevention code. How many fire departments actually do a good job enforcing the fire prevention code? Not too many. Until the fire service takes the enforcement of the maintenance provisions of the fire prevention code seriously, don’t expect that building owners will take an interest in code compliance.

Enforcement of the maintenance provisions of the fire prevention code should be Job #1 with every fire department and accidental fires which occur in buildings should be considered to be a failure of fire prevention code enforcement. In order for fire prevention code enforcement to be effective, fire department personnel assigned to suppression need to fully participate in code enforcement. In fact, fire prevention code enforcement should be considered to be the primary job of fire suppression personnel.

No fires, or fires controlled by the operation of a few sprinklers-fewer civilian and fire fighter injuries and the elimination of fire fighter fatalities. That’s the goal. That goal might just be unobtainable, but surely we can get close to achieving the goal. With proper fire prevention code enforcement, fire fighter fatalities should be as rare as smallpox and polio.

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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.