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BACK TO THE BASICS: FIRE FIGHTER SAFETY

by Richard Schulte

A report issued by a committee which referred to itself as Task Group 400 is rather disturbing. The purpose of the Task Group was to explore the issue of travel distance limitations in large single-story industrial and storage buildings. The two issues which needed to be addressed by this committee were occupant egress and fire fighter safety.

The Task Group did, indeed, do a decent job addressing the occupant egress issue in large industrial and storage buildings, but failed to recognize relatively new developments concerning the issue of fire fighter safety. Although the issue of fire fighter safety was addressed by the Task Group, it appears that somehow the Task Group neglected to discuss or consider the two **NIOSH Alerts** addressing structural fire fighting safety.

The two NIOSH Alerts which address structural fire fighting safety are **NIOSH 2005-132** and **NIOSH 2010-153**. **NIOSH 2005-132** is titled *Preventing Injuries and Deaths of Fire Fighters due to Truss System Failures*, while **NIOSH 2010-153** is titled *Preventing Deaths and Injuries of Fire Fighters using Risk Management Principles at Structure Fires*. No discussion of structural fire fighting safety, particularly in building which are 500,000 square feet and even larger in floor area, can be considered to be complete without taking the recommendations included in these two NIOSH Alerts into account.

If the Charleston Fire Department had heeded the recommendations contained in NIOSH 2005-132 on June 18, 2007, it is highly probable that the name Sofa Super Store would not be known in the fire service. If the Chicago Fire Department had heeded recommendations of both NIOSH 2005-132 and NIOSH 2010-153 on the morning of December 23rd, 2010, the two Chicago Fire Department fire fighters who perished at the abandoned Sing Way Laundry Building would likely still be alive today. The nine fire fighter fatalities which occurred at the Sofa Super Store Building and the two fire fighter fatalities which occurred at the Sing Way Laundry Building were all self-inflicted by interior building operations which should never have occurred.

Both the Sofa Super Store and the Sing Way Laundry Building were relatively small buildings when compared to the buildings which were the subject of the Task Group 400 committee. Given that, it would certainly have made sense that the committee's discussions should have included a detailed review of the fire department operations at the Sofa Super Store and the Sing Way Laundry Building.

It seems rather outrageous that a committee whose expressed purpose was to address the issue of fire fighter safety would ignore both the NIOSH Alerts and two fires which involved self-inflicted fire fighter fatalities. Perhaps NIOSH 2005-132 and NIOSH 2010-153 haven't made it out to the West Coast yet and, perhaps, the California fire service has never heard of the fire at the Sofa Super Store in Charleston.

(These two NIOSH Alerts can be found on the Fire Fighter Safety web page on this website.)

While Lt. General Russel Honore wasn't referring to the fire service in California while he was working to save New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in September 2005, his comment about being "*stuck on stupid*" might just be applicable in this case. It's time for the fire service in California to move into the 21st century with respect to fire fighter safety.

Smoke/heat vents in one-story industrial and storage buildings over 500,000 square feet to facilitate interior fire fighting operations in the event that the municipal water supply is incapacitated by seismic activity-an excellent idea if your goal is more self-inflicted fire fighter fatalities, but not so much if your goal is fire fighter safety.

Please accept my apologies if you're offended by my remarks above, but it's my opinion that self-inflicted fire fighter fatalities should not be tolerated. If utilizing the "*stuck on stupid*" comment got you to take a look at the NIOSH Alerts and give them some thought, then my mission has been accomplished. You can thank me later.

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