



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Aging in Place

100 years ago when a person became elderly they were taken care of by the members of their own family. Lives were generally shorter way back then, but if one did survive to an age when it was difficult to work, the family or maybe a close friend provided safety and security. The concept of retirement was not well developed in those days.

Today people are retiring at fairly early ages. Moreover, people are living longer than ever before. Families are not a cohesive unit anymore and the security blanket for the aged in our society has changed from a family orientation to an examination of funding sources. In essence, our senior citizens are looking forward to a long, but somewhat independent life style. Some make, some don't.

There are facilities that society has created to protect and serve these people which I have recently discussed in my columns as being vulnerable to the failure to provide adequate safeguards through the failure of elected politicians to act when they have the opportunity. These are the institutions in which the elderly often find themselves confined to when no one else can take care of them

However, the idea of the aging population having special needs has not fallen on deaf ears everywhere. There are numerous programs that are being focused on helping to keep people out of those vulnerable locations by encouraging that segment of our populations to stay right where they are. To this way of thinking, the people who are entering the twilight years should live where they are most comfortable; at home.

One concept that has been offered to help with this concept is the "reverse mortgage" that has been touted as a way of letting a person's home pay them back. These are programs like "meals on wheels". That program provides seniors with food on a regularly scheduled basis.

But like my other aspects of our society, there is no single solution to assuring that a person's golden years will be golden to the end. It is a statement of fact that the elderly do suffer a significant number of fires in these situations and it is also true that both young children and the elderly need some special considerations in order to assure that they will survive a fire scenario.

But, you know what? People don't have fires every day. Chances are your fire department is going to be going out there to those homes that are reversing the cash flow to provide emergency medical services, not fire suppression. As a result this specific target audience sometimes dips from our fire radar screen to our EMS radar screen. This phenomenon is often under-evaluated and therefore, under planned for also.



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The event that brought this to my mind in a recent conversation about a service I heard about that is aimed at improving the ability of our senior citizens to remain in their homes and yet be able to cope with their own limitations of strength and flexibility. The program is called “Aging in Place”, and is a service provided by the National Association of Homebuilders (NAHB). This program is aimed at creating a certified class of technicians who can look at a home and make suggestions about how to improve access and utilization of resources to create a more senior-friendly atmosphere.

According to the web announcement the AARP has made statements that an overwhelming number of homeowners prefer to age in place instead of moving into some strange location. AARP states that the reason many chose this course of action is to “live safely, independently and comfortably, regardless of age or ability level”.

That is a wonderful, if not outright altruistic goal and I applaud it. In fact, as I move more toward Medicare and less toward ICS myself, I have encouraged my family and friends to check it out.

Not unlike other ideas that spawn new ideas, this idea got me to thinking. What about “Safety in Place.” What could we, as fire professionals be doing to provide a new list of ideas to our elders to help make sure that they are doing all of the right things to reduce their exposure to fire and improve their ability to survive. Why not tie the concept together with how we can suggest ways of improving our services to them when medically emergencies occur?

The whole idea of the vial of life is in this vein. What if we developed a package of information about smoke detectors, sprinkler protection, two ways out, for residences, etc, into a package that we could offer these folks? Safety in Place could mean never having to say you’re sorry, couldn’t it?

Maybe we don’t ever need to go that far. Prepare the development of a “Safety in Place Brochure could be developed that could be distributed in conjunction with the NAHB’s program.

While the NAHB and the fire service have clashed over fire safety in the past, it has not been without our advances in fire and life safety. If the NAHB would add a module in the program about fire safety that would just encourage maintenance of key factors such as exits and smoke detectors perhaps even lives would be spared.

Currently the CAPS program focuses upon the unique needs of the older adult population by looking at things like making modifications during remodels and upgrades to remove barriers and improve access. These modifications currently center on things like counter tops and door handles. But they could include fire safety modifications too.



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Public educators have known for years that we need to target our audiences if we really expect the message to be heard and then acted on. If we could make a good faith effort to inform our senior citizens about what they can do to reduce their own exposure to fire, and simultaneously increase this potential to improve EMS response, what a difference that could make.

As an advocate of fire and life safety I have always believed that it is important to place a significant amount of responsibility on the person who is closest to the point of origin in a fire for their own safety. A strong response by a fire agency 30 minutes too late saves few lives. A strong fire department response to an event that has been discovered early and had people respond correctly often has a positive outcome.

What the US Census is saying is that the “graying” of the population is a real phenomenon. Fire prevention activities in the past have been responsive to a need to cope with growth and development, but only have to reverse course now to deal with a more sedentary population.

Ask yourself this question. What is the population distribution in your community? If you don't know, go to the US Census Bureau at [www.census.us.gov](http://www.census.us.gov) and look at the demographics of your jurisdiction. Do you have any identifiable target audience?

If you do then ask yourself this question; where are these people residing? If your answer is limited to residence care facilities, of institutions that provide just medical care, you are missing a segment of the population that is being addressed by the NAHB.

Last question for this column. If you know that they are there, and you know where they are; What is your plan to provide safety for them as they age in place?

The last point I want to make about the target audiences is this one. Elderly people can often be the fire services strongest critic or our greatest supporter. Some of the most influential and outspoken members of your community are part of that senior population. By focusing upon them in a positive fashion your fire agency can be perceived as being pro-active. If you have an event that could have been prevented wasn't - the opposite can occur. From the prospective of creating and retaining the public's trust and respect, the former strategy makes a lot more sense.

Regardless of what you chose to do, I do know that someone in your town, your city, even your rural fire district is going to become a “Certified Aging in Place” specialist. Look it up on the website. The URL is <http://www.nahb.org>. The program is called CAPS.

When they are talking to one of your citizens about making their home a place where they can get around and still enjoy their lives, it would be nice if the package included enough information about



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home safety to assume that they would make some improvements that would make out jobs easier to do. And it would really be nice if the were able to live out their days without a fire tragedy in their families.