



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Fire Friendly Neighborhood

Open up the door! Just go ahead and invite fire right on in! That is exactly what some of our neighborhoods do. That fact that this occurs in many of our neighborhoods could and should be a major planning issue for those in the fire service.

What I am talking about is the portion of your community where you know, from past experience, that you are more likely that you are likely to have a bad fire than any place else in town. That particular neighborhood is a target for potential loss of life and property. However, it may or may not be a target of the appropriate mitigation strategy to make it a less fire friendly neighborhood.

What provoked this article into existence was a recent magazine piece written by a law enforcement officer about “crime friendly neighborhoods”. This particular individual who was working on an advanced degree had submitted an article to a planning magazine. In that article he elaborated on all the things a developer could do to make a neighborhood more and more dangerous.

What I found most interesting about the article was the realization as I read it that the author was saying that some of the things that planners think are great ideas often result in increased crime in the community.

More and more fire departments are finding themselves on the leading edge of trying to introduce these same types of changes during the planning phases of communities. While I cannot say that it is a universal practice a significant number of fire departments are now invited to sit around a table when they are looking at a piece of blank land. That is the time in which we can affect most of the mitigation that requires being part of the infrastructure, i.e., water supply, street width, built-in fire protection, etc.

But I am not talking about those neighborhoods. I am talking about the ones that are down trodden, deteriorating, border line housing facilities in which fire is very likely to target the occupants.

Like many of you I collect information off the Internet regarding fire losses. It is not uncommon for those email messages to contain a statement about an entire family losing their lives, firefighters being blown out of multi-story windows because of excessive fire conditions, and there are event stories of how private heroes have served to save lives. My observation is that the vast majority of these stories do no emerge from suburban USA where there are a lot of middle class single-family dwellings. The vast majority of these stories seem to come from metropolitan area in which high density concentration of both lives and building conditions result in risks that sometime result in fatality.



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What is it that makes a fire friendly neighborhood? As I just stated it is really hard to find a lot of major fire problems in a community in which there is only one house on every two acres and those single family dwellings are costing between \$800,000 and \$1,000,000. Rich people seemingly don't have a lot of fires. Even middle class America is not an area of extremely high exposure. The way I found this out was by doing some research on fire deaths. I began to capture zip codes and check them against a US Census data to look at such things as income, ethnicity, population density etc.

Unfortunately we still lack a real comprehensive fire data system at our national level. While that is topic for an entirely different column the fact is we really don't know that much about the specificity of our fire deaths. We know a little bit about where they are occurring but little or nothing about all of the causal relationships on a truly credible basis.

I call this unfortunate because if you look at the crime statistics collected by the FBI they can practically tell you how many left handed, blue eyed pick pockets there are in time square on a Sunday afternoon. However, intuitively we in the fire service know that there are certain neighborhoods in which we can expect may have a serious fire occur sooner or later. What are the characteristics of these neighborhoods?

The vast majority of them have median income that is below the 50th fractal in the community being evaluated. Secondly, the vast majority of them suffer physical conditions in which the housing stock is aged and deteriorated. Then, there is a tendency for these areas to be esthetically displeasing if not outright shabby in appearance, lastly there is a tendency for these neighborhoods to have strong ethnicity consequences having to do with the number of people that are in a basic housing unit and the number of those housing units that are crowded more closely together in order to have cheap rent or ownership.

Those conditions are almost a recipe for potential loss of life. In driving through communities as I travel around the country I often have engaged fire officers with an analysis of what they thought as we drove through specific parts of their town. A classic response that I have received is that certain neighborhoods are known to just be troublesome – that not only includes fire but also emergency medical aids. Some of you out there may have heard of the term “the Friday night knife and gun club”.

There are also concentrations in our community of cultural impact and language barriers that result in a neighborhood being “fire friendly”. A good example of this can often be found in areas in which the public education materials that are supposed to convince people of appropriate behaviors are all done in English whereas most of the adults in the household do not speak English. While we might be able to educate the young children in this environment we will not see the payoff of that education to those individuals move into maturity.



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Another salient indicator of a fire friendly neighborhood is poverty. If we actually took a look at the number of fire deaths on an annual basis and were able to correlate them back to simple factors such as the number of family members living in the home and the average annual income of the primary wage earner we would probably not be surprised to find out that poor people die with much more regularity than rich people do.

And, while we don't spend an awful lot of our time worrying about our sister public safety agencies fire friendly neighborhoods tend to be crime ridden also. There are probably really good reasons why in the fire community should be working more closely with things such as neighborhood watch, and any of the social groups that are focusing on reducing crime because by reducing crime we reduce the exposure of fire deaths simultaneously.

Many, many years ago I had the opportunity to sit around a dining room table in a conversation with Bill Clark and Manny Freed talking about these kinds of fire problems. Manny offered up the idea that the burning of some of our inner cities was the first form of urban renewal. And, thirty years later I can look around and see that many of the core cities that had some of the worst fire records now have been converted into something entirely different.

What can we, as fire chiefs and fire marshals, do about all of this? The first step of course is to be aware that there is even a problem. When fire departments look at their fire prevention activities and their fire loss statistics they seldom ever correlate some of the fire prone conditions that we are talking about. By that I mean it is not uncommon for our fire losses to be distributed over the entire community without paying attention to the fact that certain neighborhoods are much more fire prone than others. Targeting these neighborhoods with more effective community education and fire prevention enforcement programs is a step in the right direction.

While many of our organizations realize that we need to bring diversity into the fire service very few are focused on the fact that we must take input from a diverse audience these days. Fire marshals should be paying attention to the number of languages being spoken in the grade schools in their community. Public educators should be preparing materials that are in the appropriate language.

I fully recognize that there are entities that are already doing this. Many of national organizations are now rising to the occasion also. But, we should go back to a term that I haven't heard mentioned in the fire service for quite a few years; target hazard. The term target hazard used to mean a specific building that we were concerned about in our community. Perhaps we should expand that to the more global implication of targeted neighborhoods, targeted populations, even targeted economic conditions.

As fire chiefs and fire marshals we have an obligation to our community to provide equity in service. But that does not mean that we have to treat everybody the same in terms of reducing the potential of loss



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of life and property. I consider it to be more equitable in a community to eliminate those fire friendly neighborhoods as quickly as possible in the interest of the equity for the community overall.