



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## The Lunatic Fringe

One of my early acquisitions for my collection I call Bulletin Board Art was a piece of paper that simply said “Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”. The inference I took from that definition was that if you wanted to change the way things are then you sometimes have to go out and do things in a different way. And of course there are consequences in doing that. For example, if you try to do something that is to far away from the mainstream of thought then you are sometimes labeled as being a little insane.

What brought this phrase to the forefront was a panel discussion at a recent Fire Rescue International in which my panel was talking about the risks that a fire chief takes in attempting to get residential sprinkler technology incorporated into the long term life safety goals of a community. Applying our definition from the previous paragraph if you continue to build residences without fire sprinklers you will continue to have significant loss in single family and multi-family dwellings. Maybe not tomorrow. But, the track record is with unprotected single family dwellings are the source of the vast majority of the loss of life and property of this country.

So, it follows that if you want to change the nature of a fire problem you have to go after some things that are going to raise a certain amount of controversy – that is the nature of being sane!

Our recently elected Second Vice President of the IAFC Kelvin Cochran has a story that he tells frequently. I have heard him tell it several times. In fact, I think he actually wears a symbol of the story on his coat jacket. It has to do with the concept of starfish.

I don't want to repeat the entire story but what it boiled down to was the idea that if you want to save starfish you have to throw them back into the water one at a time. You can't save them all but you can save the ones that you can take action on. The same attitude can well be transferred into the concept of when and where should we start doing something about the residential fire and life safety problem.

If you have committed yourself to the protection of life and property that means that you are concurrently enrolled in the idea that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. But, that is counter to everything we ever learned in our fire service careers about how to be considered a true firefighter. How many of you out there would have chosen to become a firefighter if you knew for a fact there weren't going to be that many working fires? That is the built in contradiction of this profession.

We have accepted a mission of saving lives and property, but we have also accepted that human lives and their property must be placed in danger in order for us to physically save them. The reality is that very few fire fighters, in terms of the total number that hope to someday, ever get a chance to save



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anyone's life physically. Yet, the simple act of taking position that sprinkler protection needs to go at a certain occupancy requires more courage than many of the physical acts required on the fire ground. The reason why, is because the damage that can be inflicted on you for taking that position are every bit as dangerous as an injury on the job.

I can you say this with a certain degree of certainty because I have talked to hundreds of individuals who have attempted to introduce residential sprinkler legislation into their community and many of them have the scar tissue to prove it. On the other hand I have talked to other individual fire chiefs who have taken that stand and have managed to walk away fairly unscathed. Is there any particular reason why this phenomenon occurs? I would submit that there is no one reason, but rather that there is an entire set of reasons, that must be carefully evaluated before you take the risk of putting a residential sprinkler ordinance into the arena of public scrutiny.

The is probably really dangerous trying to remember all the things that could go wrong so I think I will limit my comments in this column to talking about the things that can certainly help you survive if not succeed at being the one who wants to change the definition of the community fire problem. I have a couple of very straight forward and seemingly successful strategies.

Strategy number one is, don't pick a fight you know you are going to lose. The inference behind this strategy is to make sure that you do all of your homework before you reveal that you have any intention of doing something in this field. By that I mean that you do all of your homework before predicting success. You need to figure out what kinds of developers are in the arena, what kinds of political processes are in play, what kinds of land use and growth policies are going to be played out in the community and last but not least what role the fire department is expected to play in helping to shape that problem.

On the one hand it seems like a pretty straight forward strategy. But as I have alluded to many other times it takes a lot of time to overcome the internal and external influences that prevent a sprinkler ordinance from becoming successful. What I am suggesting with this strategy is that you do not make pronouncements about what you are going to do but rather develop all of the ammunition to determine whether it is even feasible or not before you propose taking that course of action. Part of this strategy also means doing your homework with the sprinkler industry - those who are putting in residential sprinklers throughout the country. I can't say enough about the various networking groups that have sprung up in the aftermath of the residential sprinkler movement. They are forming a network across the country that is becoming tighter and tighter with each passing day. Several individuals within these networks have built a tremendous reputation of being an excellent resource to support you in the event that you finally make the decision to move ahead on putting residential sprinkler systems into your arsenal.



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Strategy number two is to solicit support internally before you announce your concept externally. Again this is a very subtle process but it involves the fire chief making sure that they have the support of the City Manager and other key members of staff as they proceed forward in the development of the concept. At the risk of stating the obvious one of the best ways to assure that you are going to lose a battle is if you find yourself sitting in front of the City Council or County Board of Supervisors and you are the only person who is sitting on your side of the aisle. Developing this network also means reaching out and pursuing dialogue rather than expecting people to come to you with their perspective.

Strategy number three is to educate the public. They are our customers. However that customer base is developed into two separate and distinct groups. Those out there that have called upon us to provide us some service in the past and have found good reason to trust us and those that are out there that have a higher expectation of the fire service but have never had a reason to call upon us and don't know whether they trust us or not. At the time you have an opportunity to educate the public on the consequences of fire; you are laying the foundation for them accepting the fact that you are the resident expert on saving lives and property. Community education doesn't have to be a blatant education program specifically about residential sprinklers. It should be more focused on risk management and the desire of a fire department to have the highest possible quality of life for all the members of the community. Specific targeted audiences resonate with these particular issues once they have been informed of really basis issues of fire behavior, fire spread, etc., etc.

The last strategy is the exact opposite of the first one. It consists of picking your fights carefully. Essentially this boils down to making sure that you clearly understand when it is time to move when all the appropriate factors are in place. For example, there are large amounts of land available to be developed. Putting residential sprinklers in may be an appropriate offsetting mitigation.

My personal belief is that putting residential sprinklers in single family dwellings is related almost entirely to communities with large growth areas. I believe that putting residential sprinklers in apartment complexes is one of the answers to solving the problems of fighting fires in the occupancies where one fire can impact hundreds of people. Putting sprinklers in buildings that have elderly people present is a good idea. Putting sprinklers in buildings where you have the very young in beds is a good idea.

But only a lunatic would try to do these things, because the very people that would benefit from such a strategy often are the ones that resist it the most. Slowly, but inexorably the facts are making some of the lunatics of the past seem smarter every day. A recent USA Today article cited a proposed rule of the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services that, if adopted, would require sprinkler for new nursery homes. In that article it noted that about 2,300 calls a year occur annually in nursing homes, It went on to note that in the 18 worst fires that have occurred in a nursing home since the 1970's, which have killed more than 200 patients, sprinklers were not present.



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The argument, and there will always be one, is that the costs are too high. What about the costs of 200 lives? In this era of human endeavor I cannot believe that some lunatic hasn't come up with a way to finance these sprinklers using some creative scheme that has yet to be discovered. Is anyone talking about how every time there is a large loss of life there is a major lawsuit? Are there costs there? Could they be reduced?

As if to make my point a fire in Citrus Heights, California occurred in an un-sprinklered residential care facility and killed two elderly women and injured 5 others. It took 42 firefighters to deal with the fire. They had smoke detectors. There were pull boxes for alarms. Each room exited to the outside. The fire occurred at 11:20 p.m. They only housed 6 people in that facility and I bet when they all went to bed that night they thought that they were safe. Now that's crazy!

Well, the idea of being a lunatic is actually based upon the idea that people that were enamored with the moon (luna) were somehow inflicted with a disease that caused them to act strangely. They were considered persons who were mentally ill, dangerous, foolish or unpredictable. Mental institutions used to be called "lunatic asylums" or colloquially, "loony bins" (the latter term is still occasionally used both humorously and insensitively). Perhaps in the future the term lunatic will be used as a synonym for activist, advocate or true believer in that idea that people should be as well protected as they can be when they are sleeping under the supervision of some one else's care.