



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

No Time Like Now

In a previous column I described an event to you that had a significant impact on the American Fire Service. I am in reference to the awakening of the hotel motel fire problem in the aftermath of several disastrous fires. I mentioned in that article about the catastrophic theory of reform, which is a strategy that usually results in emphasis being placed on a safety measure only after somebody has died. There is even a cliché that says that every piece of legislation has either a body count or a bank account behind it. Changes are almost always made because of a seemingly insurmountable problem or a seemingly tremendous opportunity to make money. Does that apply to the fire service?

In contemporary society we talk a lot about being proactive versus being reactive. The other common name for pro-activity is “doing things now”. The alternative term for being reactive is to put things off until you can’t put them off any longer.

Shouldn’t we be more proactive if we want to limit the number of times that we have to be reactive? We talked in the previous article about the hospitality industry that aggressively dealt with a serious fire problem by installing fire sprinklers. They should be recognized for making a significant financial contribution to changing the nature of our fire problem in this country.

But, we didn’t really get down to the level of what remains to be done to eliminate the problem in its entirety. We have mentioned the theory of the Pareto Principle in previous articles also. It is simply a theory that 20 percent of your statistical component results in 80 percent of your benefit. And that 80 percent of your statistical component only results in about 20 percent of productivity. As we mentioned previously, going out and comparing your risk inventory that is un-sprinklered today may reveal an interesting picture. You can see a lot of very big hotels and motels that were built in the last twenty years they are probably very well protected. You should be very happy with that.

But ,that is not where your future losses are going to be. Your losses are going to be in the smallest facilities that are probably shorter in height and probably less in area but they still constitute a hotel motel lifestyle environment. Attacking that problem is the goal of this particular activity.

What are you doing about those buildings? They are the ones that are likely to cause the next catastrophic event. In my opinion, one of the things that we ought to be doing as fire prevention personnel is to make sure that we have an accurate inventory of our risk. Students of Vision 20/20 and practitioners of the concept of Community Risk Reduction (CRR) already understand this concept. I would suggest that it is a good idea right now to go out and do a survey of your hotels and motels and determine which ones are provided with risk mitigation practices that are proactive. Those of you that have access to computers can easily automate this kind of information so that it will not just be anecdotal, but it would accumulative.



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Once you have completed that inventory, you might wish to turn your attention to an education program for the property owners and managers of such facilities. In a previous column, I have talked a lot about how catastrophic events are brought to the public's mind because of some very spectacular fires. We don't need a spectacular fire to cause you to start communicating with the hotel industry. We are already aware of one significant factor. Most people who are staying in the rooms in these facilities are operating in a strange and often very difficult environment for them to fully comprehend. They are among the highest target audience for needing risk mitigation. Let's make sure they get the best protection around.

Having worked on a lot of specific risk inventories, I can tell you that sometimes the local property owner may or may not fully comprehend their own level of protection. They may not understand that their insurance rates can be affected or even penalized for failure to seek built-in fire protection.

In effect, this discussion focuses on the concept of risk mitigation as being an extremely important factor in changing a community fire problem. Those un-sprinklered motels are not going to go away. They are going to continue to yield economic impact on the community depending on whether or not they can fill up those rooms. Every time we burn out one of those rooms we have an economic impact on the tax base of our community. It follows then that risk reduction means that we ought to be addressing certain improvements in our risk inventory over time. By acting on whatever improvements we can get over time we can alter the course of our risk inventory. I have often referred to this as the concept of incremental compliance. Another term that you might add to your vocabulary is called "scheduled compliance", and that is to create a calendar of events to seek incremental improvements over a multi-year period.

There are now changes in the configuration and design in sprinkler systems that allows retrofits to be done even more economically than they have been done in the past. What we need to be focusing on is how to bring those techniques to bear on the last remaining components of the hotel motel fire problem. That might involve an increased amount of education and awareness being devoted to both hoteliers and travel agent.

The final point about taking action in a proactive fashion is fairly straightforward. If you do not care about this problem, then I doubt seriously that anybody else will. Fire protection is all about protection and not fire. The degree to which you place an emphasis in your organization on reducing the risk probably makes the fire department even more valuable to the overall culture in your community.