



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## What is There to Burn

One of the earliest textbooks that helped to shape the body of knowledge for modern fire management was the First Edition of the ICMA's "Green Book". In that text, there was a statement that said that all fire protection starts with determining "what there is to burn." The words were simple enough, but the answer was complicated even in the 1960's. There was a big difference between what there was to burn in metropolitan America versus Mayberry, USA.

The distinction has not gone away. What has changed is to move beyond what there is to burn to a new paradigm; what is there that can go wrong. The reason for this paradigm shift can be attributed to several changes in society. The first is the idea that fire departments are no longer just firefighting entities. They are the 1<sup>st</sup> line of defense against almost every community problem other than law enforcement and their pursuit of crimes in progress. Even in those cases, the fire department often is part of the first response, which is an interesting exposure, created by the adoption of most fire agencies in the expanded role in EMS in society. How many times have rescue crews showed up as first due to a crime scene. It is often the difference between the fire response time of less than five minutes and the law enforcement approach of same day service.

The second variable is that urban and rural America has merged in many ways. Community life styles have turned small communities into areas where million dollar homes are built between barns and alongside stockyards. Equity immigrants have turned the "discovered" community into enclaves of homes that are creating a lot of emergency activity, especially EMS, but provide little in the form of tax base revenue. Then, believe it or not, there is still a rural America that is trying to keep pace with changes which are manifested by changing standards and best management practices. How many volunteers have responded to a wreck to be confronted with a electric vehicle or an airbag problem?

To focus on all three of the variables it is probably appropriate to note two commonalities that exist between them. Every fire department is delivering a level of service whether it is clearly defined in written policy or not. Secondly, most ever fire agency is doing its best to provide a service level that gives confidence in the community that when you call for help, a best effort will be made.

Among the tools that have been adopted to help define the effort has been the concept of a "standard of cover." Generally speaking, this concept has now embodied into several NFPA standards. For career departments there is NFPA 1710. The parallel in NFPA 1720 is for volunteer organizations. For better or worse, these two NFPA standards have not been utilized equally. The really don't mean the same thing.

This is probably because the issue of providing full time fire coverage is a lot more driven by economics than it is by any other factor. The issue of providing volunteer service is driven more by availability than



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any other factor. The SOC concept has evolved into a methodology to justify expenditures rather than to fully educate the community as to what they are getting in the way of service.

As a result NFPA 1720 has sort of been relegated to a “whatever you do is ok” for departments that are essentially staffed by volunteers. That is a problem, because it’s not true. All fire agencies provide a level of service and the more clearly that level of service is defined in the community, the more likely that level of service meets the community’s expectations.

The Center for Public Safety Excellence has provided excellent guidance on how this applies to most career departments. The developmental process for volunteers has not been so clear.

In the interest of providing a viable iteration we should explore how each of the basic principles of SOC applies to the volunteer environment. And that starts with risk assessment. Is there any significant difference between the concept of risk assessment based upon whether the staff that responds is paid or volunteer? The answer is No. A small building is a small building. A big building is a big building. A building with a low occupant load is one problem. A building with a high occupancy load is a lot more of a risk.

However, risk assessment levels to community expectation and this is where the consideration begins to change. I believe it is reasonable to state that there is a definite expectation that once you have assessed risk for a career fire agency there is an expectation that any response will be offensive in nature. There is an expectation, although often completely ignored in the write-up of most SOC’s. That expectation is that a fire department’s job is to limit fires to the room of origin. That is best described as an offensive strategy. Room and contents is actually a regularly accepted minimum loss when evaluating a department’s performance. Burning building to the ground is not what a fire department exists to oversee.

That is where the fork in the road occurs. In communities protected by volunteers that have minimal levels of staffing available, the same scenarios are simply not possible. In short, some scenarios are almost always putting the department on the defensive upon arrival.

This discussion leads back to one of the fundamental arguments we are still experiencing with the building community over residential sprinklers. They have continually refused to see the wisdom in using this solution to make an impact on America’s fire problem. They have gone so far as to prohibit the use the technology in communities that WANT TO USE it. What arrogance. What Hubris.

But, the battle is not over yet. As we continue to gain experience in communities that do have sprinkler we are going to see a change over time. The parts of the country that have been denied the opportunity



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to see how residential sprinklers can reduce losses will eventually be less desirable places to live because they cannot offer the