

Be the Master of Your Fate



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A common term that is used when something tragic happens to a person is the word “accident.” But when someone is driving 100 mph on a freeway, swerving in and out of traffic, and he collides with a slow-moving vehicle in the fast lane, that gets labeled an accident. In fact, it was not accidental at all. Rather, it was a direct result of someone doing something inappropriate that resulted in harm to another human being. This can occur in the inverse, e.g., when somebody doesn’t do something they are supposed to do, and another person is harmed as a result.

What got me onto this subject was the observation of a growing trend that should be of concern to all fire officers — a significant increase in the failure of built-in fire protection to properly function, which often has resulted in problems for firefighters. In fact, it could be argued that such failures qualify as a safety issue. For example, there are several cases on the books in which initial attacking fire companies went into buildings expecting to use the standpipe system but found the system dysfunctional. Can we really call that an accident?

I don’t think so. If we mandate something going on inside of a building we have a reasonable expectation that it is going to work when we apply our fireground tactics and strategy. Whether it is a fire alarm system, a fire sprinkler system, a firewall or a standpipe system, somebody has to make sure that it is capable of functioning when the alarm goes off.

So what does this mean to you? If you are reading this column as a fire chief, you ought to be asking yourself whether your department’s policies and procedures adequately address the component of maintenance on mandated systems. If you are a fire marshal reading this column, you ought to be asking yourself whether your program management includes annual evaluation sophisticated built-in technology.

Anything and everything that we mandate inside of a building needs this type of scrutiny. The more complicated an occupancy is, the greater the reason that it should be inspected at least on an annual

basis. The more that the technology is obscured or not used on a day-to-day basis, the more reason it should be subject to periodic maintenance to ensure its performance.

During my career I have heard many horror stories of sprinkler connections filled with beer cans, standpipes in which the brass fittings have been stolen, fire cache rooms in which the equipment has been removed and sold, and fire alarm systems that had gone off in the false alarm mode so often that they had been terminated. Ask yourself this question, if any building that you have under your area of responsibility has any of those components, can you afford to have an “accident”?

But ensuring the performance of such technology is only half the battle. The other half concerns training to ensure that they are used effectively when the time comes. I fully realize that many fire departments are struggling desperately with training because of other pressures. Nonetheless, I would be remiss if I didn’t suggest that training with technology is an important part of our overall competency. The degree to which a department places a priority on the knowledge of its personnel regarding everything that is mandated into a building will determine to large extent the degree to which accidents are avoided.

Of course, it may be possible for you to have an extremely effective code enforcement program and still have something go wrong. I often have said that, as far as I am concerned, Murphy probably was a battalion chief. Bad things happen to building components when events occur. But one of the things that never should happen is allowing building components to become gradually less effective year after year.

In the final analysis, the entire purpose of this column is to ensure that you are not on the evening news explaining how an “accident” happened in one of the buildings in which you mandated a system installation that was found wanting at the time of an emergency. It is an uncomfortable, but at the same time, generally avoidable scenario. ■