



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Dead Baby Speech

When we attempt to justify what a fire department does for a community there are a wide variety of reactions. One of the reactions I have experienced is the so called “dead baby speech.” It boils down to City Managers or Mayors saying to me that they have been very irritated at fire officials who attempt to justify what we are trying to do on the basis of painting a picture that babies are going to die in their bed and the families are going to succumb if we don’t have a truck company - or “you fill in the blank.” Have we done that? Have we actually treaded on the sensibilities of communities of predicting that people are going to die in their beds if we don’t get our way?

Well, to be honest I think some people have. As a matter of fact I have actually witnessed presentations in which individuals have predicted the deaths in their community if certain things weren’t done. On the other hand I would have to say that I could probably count those speeches on the palm of one hand over a forty-year time frame.

Probably the most important thing is whether or not you have given that speech. If you have then you have either won your battle or you have lost your war. And perhaps you have your own opinions on whether or not that is an appropriate thing to do.

The nature of this column is to talk about how we justify fire protection elements in our community without emotion. Or can we? Anybody who has ever been at the scene of a real fire fatality cannot help but feel the emotional aspects of this job. I can recall my first fatality very vividly. She was a woman that died in a single family dwelling fire. The fire occurred at approximately 0400 in the morning. We stood no more of a chance of rescuing that woman than being able to fly. What was the real issue as to why that person had died in that fire?

Well it didn’t take me long to figure it out. I was fortunate enough to be in a position in a department where I got to assist the fire investigator. In short order we discovered that the woman was elderly - she was an alcoholic - she was a heavy smoker - there was no smoke detection in the house - and the fire had gone to complete flash over before a roving police officer actually witnessed the building on fire. Would anything we had done from a manual fire-fighting basis been able to save that woman? I think not!

In the ensuing forty years of fire fighting I have seen a wide variety of other fire deaths. And, I have seen some remarkable saves. In the process of viewing all of these I have drawn some conclusions about who is the most likely to die in a fire. And it is not babies in their beds. Granted we do lose a lot more small children than we do any other group but the real issue is that poor people have fires with a higher frequency and more severe loses than middle class or wealthy people. Moreover we have noted that people who have family histories of alcoholism, heavy smoking and a large percentage of elderly present



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in the household have a greater chance of having a fatal fire. Communities that do not have adequate smoke detection and protective building codes tend to have more severe fires than those that do.

So how does all of this relate to justifying ordinances? In the first place I believe that we spend entirely too much time trying to trumpet the relative value of the so-called American Time Temperature Curve. I happen to be a proponent of the use of it from a standpoint of scientific analysis but a lot of people are misrepresenting it when it comes to discussing it in a public manner. In the first place we talk about the five-minute response time as if it is sacred. But there is even a more sacred time frame and that is the period of time between ignition and detection. That particular element of time has more to do with whether we are going to save lives and property than any other single component.

How many of you out there have actually arisen from your beds in a fire house, opened up the door and witnessed a fire literally within blocks of your own fire station? I am not talking about small fires I am talking about totally involved structures. I recall one that occurred in Santa Ana California right across the street from the headquarters fire station. When the company officer rolled the doors up to respond that morning he was greeted with an entire square block of a Chevrolet car agency that was totally involved. That crew had to drive around the block in order to get oriented well enough to be able to deal rationally with a fire problem that they were faced with.

When we are justifying fire protection components we need to look at the entire sequence of events and to place a strong emphasis on the need for the fire department to be made aware that an emergency is in progress if they expect to have any kind of an outcome. Granted, most of the budget in most fire departments is devoted almost entirely to the manual fire suppression force. The rationale behind that is really fairly simple. We do not staff for initial attack. We staff for major involvement.

But we want to start making our ordinances more performance based we need to make sure that each of the components are adequately addressed as we justify our perspectives on those things that we want in our budget. For example I think it is perfectly appropriate to let people know that sighting fire stations is an extremely important element of fire defense but, that the sighting of fire stations also needs to be accompanied by adequate mitigation in the field of smoke detection and fire alarm capacity to assure that those stations stand some degree of opportunity to be successful.

Doing one without the other is sort of like trying to tie a knot with one hand. You might be able to tie a very simple knot if you know the tricks of the trade but you cannot put together anything one handed that is sophisticated enough to do any work. As a rock climber early in my career I discovered that there are certain kinds of things that you could do one handed but you are far better off if you tie the right knot for the right job. In previous documentation I have discussed the time temperature curve and another sequence of events - the Utstein Criteria. The Utstein Criteria has to do with cardiac survivability. To date I have yet to see a really good flow chart on trauma treatment and I am not really



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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sure if anybody has done a real good time event analysis of hazardous materials. But as Rexford Wilson coined the term over thirty years ago time is either our enemy or our allies.

If we wish to make our justifications sound, we need to be discussing the consequences of the element of time as it relates to the entire sequence of events. For example, I do not believe that it is appropriate to talk about residential fire deaths when we are discussing the reason for our fire alarm system in a major hotel. There is no correlation between the two. On the other hand I believe it is appropriate to note that unless we control the fire to its point of origin and/or provide adequate smoke detection and alarm activation to get people awake in a single family dwelling the probability of a fire death continues to exist.

Components of the fire protection delivery system need to be justified on their impact on the outcome. For example, I could make the case that a community that is all single story with strip mall locations and limited industrial or manufacturing still has reason for truck company operations. That is because truck companies are instrumental in things other than just raising the big stick to squirt water from time to time. Effective truck operations involve ventilation, salvage and overhaul operations as well as adding staff to take care of safety related items such as utilities and good breathing apparatus operations.

The problem comes in; in the fire service when we want a half a million-dollar aerial ladder that is one hundred feet in length when in fact we only need one that is fifty. This may get real argumentative at this point but quite frankly there is a lot of fire apparatus bought in this country not because it has been based on the performance that is required but because somebody else has one. That kind of "me to" approach is wearing a little thin with people who have to pay the bill.

My point of view on justification is that everything has a reason and every reason needs to be clearly articulated. I once ran an 85-foot aerial apparatus in the City of San Clemente. There were those that thought I was crazy for even bringing an aerial into the community because of the narrow winding streets. On the other hand I purchased a tiller apparatus that had more maneuverability than some of the engine companies that would be responding in on mutual aid. Moreover I went out and evaluated property setbacks and the need to get to upper floors of apartment buildings and commercial structures that were on a very topographically challenged community. I was able to justify the truck company on the basis of its contribution to fireground operations not because I was attempting to say that people were going to die in their beds if we couldn't get an aerial to them.

As always when you start discussing something that is philosophical as this there will be people who take different points of view. I am sure there are those who are reading this column whose head will be nodding up and down agreeing with me and I am just as likely to have people whose heads are shaking side to side expressing a dilemma with regard to agreeing with me.



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What I am attempting to challenge here is the absolute necessity of those of us in the fire profession to make sure that when we make an argument we make a good argument. If we are going to rely on emotions than we must expect that the answer will sometimes be emotional. I can recall one conversation with an engineer who was a member of my staff (professional engineer not apparatus operator) who helped me prepare a report on a particular program we were working on with regard to some fire code amendments. Our report was extensively researched with a lot of numbers that had emerged from other peoples work. The comment made to me by this engineer was “you would think we were going to the moon instead of just making this town safe.”

I took that as a compliment at the time. And I continue to support the idea that whenever we attempt to move forward with justification of what we wish to do that we are as professional and as focused as we can be on all of the facts that we can bring into evidence to justify our position.

We don't need to worry about whether there will be loses in our community - there always will be. If you don't think so just ask yourself this simple question. That question; why does everybody have fire insurance? They have it because it is likely; it is probable and therefore reasonably predictable. Why does a fire department exist? To do everything we can to protect the quality of life in our communities. Even if we are given every tool that could possibly be available to us it is possible that some baby is going to die in its bed. And, it is highly likely that a major building that pays a lot of sales tax can burn to the ground also. If we are doing our jobs our communities at night should be serene and safe.

Which raises another question, is why is it that firefighters brag about who has the most runs?