



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Evacuate; This is not a Drill

Evacuation drills. They are real ho-hummers. I have been through many fire drills at schools. I witnessed a few more at institutions with public assembly. And, I have witnessed real evacuations from buildings that are on fire. Most of my experience involved restaurants and retail sales.

The predominant thing about evacuation is that conducting drills and exercises for evacuation are really boring. The secondary factor is that real events can be outrageously horrific. Maybe that is why both scenarios are so critical to fire and life safety. As a fire service, we need to overcome the resistance to practicing evacuations if we ever expect to make real evacuations efficient and effective.

We have ample evidence that things can go wrong quickly in scenarios that require evacuation. History is replete with stories involving people dying because of failed evacuations. If you would like to review a few of these examples go to the internet and type in major theater fires – or major restaurant fires. We have been killing people in these occupancies for hundreds of years. As a fundamental question, I would ask all of you, I wonder how many people remember the Iroquois Theater Fire, the Happyland Fire, the Coconut Grove Fire, and the Beverly Hills Super Club? If they are not part of your body of knowledge, you should make them so. What may surprise you is how many years ago these events occurred. This begs the question of, did we learn anything?

If you knew about those fires, congratulations. If you didn't, I hope you can learn from them. But, let's move on to something more contemporary. What about some of our more recent events? That is the point I really want to make.

Are you familiar with the Station Nightclub Fire?¹ This event should be in the memory of most people who possess the rank of battalion chief or fire chief. Have you heard about the Fine Line Music Café Fire in St. Paul or the recent nightclub fire in Seattle? In the former case, the station fire made national headlines. In the latter two, you probably never heard about them because they were successful evacuations and no lives were lost.

So, one of the most predictable observations we can make right now is that regardless of us living in a modern world, we can experience large loss of life fires as if we have learned nothing from the past. This does not mean that we haven't tried, but a combination of apathy, ignorance and inappropriate response by both building owners and fire officials, means the problem still exists. What do I mean by inappropriate response? What I am referring to is building owners and occupants often go out of their way to avoid compliance. Fire officials often fail to engage in adequate enforcement activities

¹ Baylick, John, *Killer Show; The Station Nightclub Fire*, University Press of New England 2012



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considering their level of risk. As long as we are talking about websites, go to the NFPA website and look up the ten deadliest public assembly and nightclub fires. You can quickly gain a perspective on this problem. However, once you have read about them, the more important question is, what are you going to do to make sure it never happens in your community?²

Now that you have obtained a reason to do so, let's talk about your next steps. Go to the International Fire Code and look up the code requirement. What does the fire code say about evacuation planning in these occupancies? Do you have any potential liability if you fail to look at these occupancies frequently?

Baylick's book clearly describes how convoluted, complex and in some cases inadequate the courtroom is in determining what is an appropriate outcome. You should probably have as a long term goal in your career that you would not be in a courtroom explaining what you did or did not do to make sure evacuations are being done in a meaningful manner.

Course of Action

1. Without getting up from your desk, ask yourself how many public assembly occupancies you have in your community. This should be part of your risk management profile.
2. How often have they been inspected and what level of compliance code exists in those buildings?
3. Is your documentation accurate?
4. Have any of those inspections involved looking at the building when it is full of people as opposed to an empty cavern at 0900 in the morning?

If the answer to any of these questions is difficult to determine, then perhaps it is time to do a little analysis.

Lastly, there are five questions that should be part of your inquiry.³

1. Do you currently have all of the staff you need to do the work currently assigned to your office, or are you shorthanded?
2. Do you have the expertise to conduct a valid job task analysis?
3. Do you have the expertise to develop viable and valid curriculum?
4. Do you have the resources to deliver the training, either in person or otherwise?
5. Are you willing to accept the responsibility/liability that comes with this training?

² www.nfpa.org/safety-information

³ Personal interview, Jim Tidwell, May 8, 2014



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The next step in your action plan to prevent a community tragedy is to evaluate what property owners and event planners have done to be adequately prepared to conduct a real evacuation. One of the resources that you should make available is crowd management training so that onsite staff especially during late night events is adequately trained to perform that task. The following is information on where you can obtain that valuable training: www.crowdmanagers.com. It is also available through several organizations, including NASFM at www.firemarshals.org, the Center for Campus Fire Safety at www.campusfiresafety.org, the International Code Council at www.iccsafe.org/crowdmanager.

Summary

The book we described early on about a Killer Show was not a fire service textbook. Nonetheless it contains numerous lessons that we can ill afford to ignore. Just reading the descriptions of the painful experiences of those who survived this fire ought to be required reading for anyone enforcing fire codes. It is graphic, personal and emotionally draining. And, it is the real reason we do what we are supposed to be doing to enforce fire codes in our community. You probably won't get a certificate for reading this material, but it is absolutely essential that we understand the consequences of evacuation failure when it comes to protecting our communities. What is your plan to make sure you never have to explain why an evacuation failed?