



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

FIRE - AN ALARMING SITUATION

A real fire is not at all like it is portrayed in movies. When fire strikes, you don't just put a wet handkerchief over your mouth and dash through the flames to safety or to perform a rescue. I know. I am a professional firefighter. I have been inside a thousand burning dwellings. It is a hostile and violent environment — one that requires firefighters to wear specialized clothing and to have special training just to survive.

Perhaps these myths are part of the reason people do not think of fire safety in their everyday lives. Yet, from a fire-safety point of view, the most dangerous place is your home. The reason? Because it has so few built-in fire protection devices and it is the place where fire occurs the most frequently.

This problem is even more pronounced if a person happens to be disabled. Someone who can't get out of bed on his own or uses a wheelchair is obviously in danger during a fire. But so is a person who cannot move quickly, cannot talk freely, cannot hear ringing bells, blaring horns, or cannot see. A disabled person can deal with most obstacles on his own, but fire survival is different. Survival depends on preplanning and some very specialized equipment and technology.

Three steps to help you prepare for an emergency are: Learn about fire safety; develop a plan for potential fire emergencies; and be totally aware of what your capabilities and limitations are in dealing with real fire emergencies. Think through all of the possible problems you could encounter and prepare step-by-step contingency plans for dealing with them.

Your local fire department is one of the best resources you have to start this process. Firefighters associations on the local and national level have been involved in preparing specialized materials for those who may need special assistance during a fire. Your local fire department would like to know of the presence of handicapped people so they can also pre-plan how to best protect them. The International Association of Firefighters (IAFF) sponsors a program called Life Safety Program for the Disabled. For more information write IAFF, 1750 New York Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) has published numerous studies on fire safety. Brochures are available that explain many practices and procedures which deal with disabled people in different situations. For information write NFPA, Batterymarch Park, Quincy, Mass.

A booklet, "Wheeling To Fire Safety", is available from the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association. This pamphlet covers a wide range of techniques to use in case of a fire. For information write EPVA, 432 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Everyone should have access to two ways of getting out of a building. Alternate routes out of a bedroom are extremely important. You should select an apartment or residence that has features which work to your ad-vantage, such as multiple exits, doors, and ramps.

If you are in bed, it is absolutely essential you have a telephone immediately accessible to you. The telephone number of the fire department should be posted right on the telephone. Another good idea is to have a whistle, like a traffic officer uses. This whistle can often summon assistance when a human voice will not attract enough attention. Another tool that should be available is a flashlight which can be used to signal out windows at night or assist a person in escaping if the power is lost during an emergency.

Words cannot replace actions when a fire strikes. When fire occurs four basic things should be dealt with. The fire has to be discovered, an alarm has to be sounded for the occupants and to alert the fire department, the occupants must escape from the heat, smoke, and fire gases, and lastly, the fire must be controlled as quickly as possible.

The first line of defense for safety from fire is a good smoke detector, properly located and maintained. In the case of those who are hearing impaired, several manufacturers have developed smoke detectors that not only sound a local alarm, but they set off strobe lights and even gently rock a person's bed to awaken them. These detectors work on different stimulus than regular detectors but the idea is the same — to alert a per-son in the area as quickly as possible. For more information on this type of equipment, write Institute for Fire and Burn Education, 1377 K St., N.W., Suite 667, Washington, D.C. 20005.

A recent extension of this concept is even more aggressive. There is equipment that connects to the detector and hooks up to a person's telephone. These devices, which are marketed under a wide variety of trade names, are part of a technology called ARRAS, Automatic Residential Remote Alarm Systems. Some of these devices contain a small microprocessor so they can dial the local fire department and report an alarm as the person in the area is being alerted. Often these devices also include additional buttons for summoning medical assistance and police officers. Write to International Association of Fire Fighters, 1750 New York Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

Many communities have installed special telephones, TTY units (Telephone Teletypes) that allow speaking impaired people to communicate for help with both police and fire departments.

If you live in a high-rise or even a multi-storied dwelling and are non-ambulatory, other measures may also be considered. One new escape device that has recently been demonstrated to fire agencies is a tube-like mechanism. This tube is made of a special elastic material that inhibits a person's descent through the tube to a very slow rate. An escaping person can completely stop his descent by ex-tending



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

his elbows outward. This slight bit of pressure will stop you from going down until you want to. In fact, this tube has been designed so an unconscious person can be lowered to the ground through it. If you cannot control your own de-scent, a ground based person such as a firefighter, can control the speed by placing tension on the tube. This is done by pulling the tube away from the building. For information write, Palladium California, Inc., 2265 Westwood Blvd., Suite 425, Los Angeles, CA 90064.

The last bit of technology that should be of interest is actually the oldest, but least known. It is automatic fire protection or "fire sprinkler heads." In the past, sprinklers have only been used in large buildings such as hospitals and commercial buildings. Within the last two years, this has all changed for the better.

Fast-response sprinkler heads, designed to recess into ceilings, and the availability of new thermo-plastic pipe has made it financially feasible to build or "retro-fit" fire sprinklers right into the residence. For information write Central Sprinkler Systems, 4th and Cannon, Lansdale, PA 19446.

The residential sprinkler system works on a very simple principle. A water system feeds a series of heads that are designed to go off when a fire produces a certain temperature level in a room. The sprinkler heads can limit the size of a fire to such a small area that a person who cannot move can survive in the same room with a fire.

Sprinklers are the fastest means available to limit a fire's growth. They are also among the simplest to design and install. The technology of these systems is so simple that it is relatively easy to retrofit existing homes.

A home can be equipped with a series of sprinkler heads connected to a plastic piping system that is placed in the attic or crawl space. The system is fed by the domestic water system and does not require extensive changes to either the home or the water supply.

At your workplace, your coworkers should be prepared to help you in case of fire. This should include a pre-designated escape plan that includes familiarization with the building's exits and alarm systems. You should practice the plan often to make sure there are no complications.

Some items listed cost money. But most ideas only cost time. Reality is that almost everyone has an accidental fire at least once in their life. Using an old phrase: forewarned is fire safe!

Safety Precautions

Stay calm. Do not try to overcome fear by trying to do everything at once. Alert anyone you can with a whistle or audible device. Call the fire department immediately even if the fire appears minor.



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Try to get as many doors closed as possible between you and the origin of the fire. Stay low. If you are in bed, you should have some procedure for getting down as low as possible. (Hot gases tend to stay high in a room.)

If you can't leave the area, you should try everything to attract the attention of firefighters, even after they are on the scene.

Develop a plan that takes into consideration your handicap and your capabilities. You may be able to develop some special techniques that will make the difference in an emergency.