



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

GI – GO

You knew what that acronym was before I even had to explain it. It stands for garbage in, garbage out. This is nothing but an update of the old tried and true – what you read shows you how you sew.

Unfortunately I have some bad news for you. We are doing it all the time. What I am talking about specifically is the deplorable conditions of most of our incident reporting. You probably are going to tell me your fire department has done a pretty good job. But, I would challenge you to test that assumption by going down there and actually looking at a few things.

Let me ask you what kind of score you would get on the following test:

- A. Every incident your department responds to is being documented.
___ yes ___ no
- B. On every incident that is being responded to the fire officer is filing it out in accordance with departmental policy.
___ yes ___ no
- C. Does your incident reporting system capture essential elements to be able to determine whether or not you are meeting your fire departments response goals?
___ yes ___ no
- D. Does your department have a numbering and street naming convention that makes sure that all locations are handled in a similar fashion?
___ yes ___ no
- E. Is there anyone in your organization who is tasked with the responsibility of quality control over input of incident records?
___ yes ___ no
- F. Is your organization reporting the incident reports to the state or to the federal government so they can be aggregated to help form nationwide fire statistics?
___ yes ___ no
- G. Do you regularly use fire incident reports to do evaluations of response time goals?
___ yes ___ no
- H. Do you regularly use incident reports to examine trends and patterns in fires or emergency medical services calls in the community?
___ yes ___ no

Well, how did you do? If you scored pretty high on that list, then you are probably one of the ten percenters who is actually making an effort to make our nationwide fire statistics relevant in the decision making process. If you scored in the ten or twenty percent on the bottom end, don't worry.



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Nobody is going to come and bother you – as a matter of fact, it is a good possibility that nobody even knows that you are not doing much. There simply is no system in the fire service today that really is bringing about an adequate and appropriate use of statistics.

Many times in my column I elude to the performance of some of our sister entities such as law enforcement. This one is not going to be an exception. Cops, the FBI, the Department of Justice, can practically tell you how many left handed, Lithuanian pickpockets there are. Not only do cops collect more data than we do, they mine it almost constantly.

Quick – name me one think tank in the United States that is really focused on the American Fire Problem? I am not talking about places that teach classes. Granted we have some universities in which there are a few professors talking about fire protection policy but I am talking about a think tank at the level that law enforcement is supported with throughout the United States.

I'll bet you couldn't come up with one. As a matter of fact neither can I. I would be really curious if any of you out there really believe that there is a think tank. The closest I have come to this is I had a discussion about it one day and an individual told me that he knew where there was a dunk tank, and when I reminded him I was referring to a think tank rather than dunk tank he recanted his position.

This issue really begs the question. Are we really that concerned about this problem? I don't think so. As a matter of fact I think the average fire chief if you gave them the opportunity to go back to doing nothing but making log entries in their fire station instead of doing incident reporting many would chose to do so. Their reasons are varied.

And among those reasons is the fact that most people do not know what to do with statistics once you give them to them. Our educational system at the community college level teaches fire officers absolutely nothing about the use of inferential statistics. City managers don't seem to prize that kind of data either. Our firefighters would be extremely pleased if we would give up all of the work and energy that goes into fire reporting systems because they feel they have other things to do.

In a previous column I talked about the fact that we need to paint pictures in our communities in order to obtain moral and fiscal support to continue providing fire protection at the levels in which we feel are appropriate. This is where the idea of garbage in garbage out really starts to come home to roost. If our incident reporting system is as loose as it appears to be then it is highly probable that anybody who would be evaluating our policy proposals regarding fire protection would be skeptical of the information.

Believe it or not in the past that was probably fairly common. I have seen numerous occasions in which the fire service has misused statistics to make a point and actually got away with it. That was back in the



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days when some of the people that we were communicating with were amateur politicians with no staff.

A lot of that has changed. As a matter of fact with increasing affluence of politicians we often find that our elected officials are becoming more and more sophisticated and have raised the bar on what they will accept from us. I am not talking about every place in the United States. There are probably still places where all you have to do is tell your authority having jurisdiction that you want something and they will give it to you. But more and more communities are asking tougher and tougher questions before they will accept our word on any specific recommendation.

There are many fire officers who have expressed to me the opinion that we must force more and more mandatory rules on the implementation of incident reporting systems for evaluating fire protection. In the short term I think that strategy is probably going to win in some places, however, in the long term I think it is going to fail.

We often characterize what we do as being “fire science”. Well where is the science part of it? It starts with us understanding our problems much more specifically then we do today. I have a tremendous amount of respect for the work done by the statisticians at the National Fire Protection Association, United States Fire Administration and even the Department of Justice, which has information on arson fires. They are however laboring under considerable liability. Most of the data that they receive is not very clean at all.

The easy definition of clean data means that you don't have to go in and fix it if you want to use it for any purpose. I get a chance to look at a lot of charts and tables like that and I can share with you the fact that a lot of stuff that gets through our record keeping systems is almost useless when it comes to decision analysis.

A good example came to my attention recently when we were doing fire incident reporting for a fairly large area and when we attempted to geocode the locations for use on maps we were only able to geocode about 40 percent of the addresses. The other 60 percent were missing data elements, which included misspelled words, wrong street annotations, and in some cases there weren't addresses at all. My favorite was one regarding a major mass casualty incident in which the address was listed as “Interstate Freeway Northbound.”

We need to fix this gap the fire service profession. I have been tooting this horn now for so many years now people probably are not listening to the music. What I would submit to you is the longer we put off doing a better job of documenting and utilizing our key service to the community the less support we are going to receive when the chips are really down. I watch a lot of departments spend thousands of dollars on pieces equipment that they are never going to use but maybe once a year – and I see very few



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fire departments willing to invest in the GPS unit to mount on every piece of fire apparatus so we can properly locate where every one of our incidents are occurring. We love our toys. But if we are going to be more scientific about what we are doing to serve our communities we ought to be looking at a nationwide overhaul of the management information systems within the fire service. I am not going to go so far as to say it is broken. But I will go so far as to say it is not working.

If your fire department is taking incident reporting seriously, congratulations. If your fire department is not taking it seriously, you ought to be concerned.