



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Has the Lesson Been Learned?

There are probably not too many firefighters around today who still remember the Winnecoff Fire in Atlanta Georgia. There might be a few around who can remember what they were doing when they heard about the MGM Grand Fire in Las Vegas. How about the Stoeffers Inn in New York? These are salient events in the history of loss of life and property to fires in hotels. Yet at this stage in the game, they almost look like badly distorted history lessons. Have we actually learned our lessons yet about fires in hotels?

My reason for raising this issue is a recent article in a newspaper. USA Today described a severe hotel fire in the City of San Diego that resulted in significant impact on that community. Almost instantly, I started remembering the significant reaction to a siege of hotel fires that resulted in a change in the national philosophy about fire sprinklers. But I haven't heard much discussion about it over the last ten years. Seemingly the problem of hotel fires has gone to the back burner.

What I am talking about is the Fire Safety Act of 1990 (PL 101-391) sometimes called the Hotel-Motel Fire Safety Act. In the fire service we often talk about what is called the catastrophic theory of reform. That essentially means that whenever something bad happens and we have a serious consequence suddenly the policy people begin to pay attention to it. Lacking that catastrophic event, policy people seem to drift off into ambivalence and apathy over time. The events that prompted the Hotel Motel Safety Act were dramatic. They consisted of two major fires in Las Vegas and a couple of fires on the east coast. A lot of people died. It got the public's attention. But that is now over twenty years ago. So my first test question in this column is; what do you remember about the Fire Safety Act in the first place? Has the idea of fully sprinklering hotels contributed to the increase in built in fire protection at a sufficiently high level that these kinds of incidents are unlikely to occur again? Has the philosophy of public fire protection in the United States totally solved the exposure to the traveling public? Or has it become a blip in the past history of our profession? I tend to think that it is a combination of a little of both.

My argument starts with the fact that when the Hotel Motel Fire Safety Act was passed there was a huge influx in the installation of sprinklers into most of the major motel hotel chains. One cannot go very far without realizing that some of these hotels made fire protection a number one priority. Among these we find pioneers in the system such as Sonny Scarf with Marriott Corporation and Kathy Slack with Central Sprinklers, Jim Dalton and Steve Hart with the National Fire Sprinkler Association. It is pretty hard to build a modern hotel or motel without sprinklering them because of current fire and building codes.



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But, where is that emphasis today? Did we actually finish the job? Or, did we achieve what is commonly referred to as the Pareto Principle? If you understand the Pareto Principle, it is a balance between the amount of effort it takes to achieve something and the actual percentage of effort that accomplishes anything. It is sometimes called the 80/20 Principle. Perhaps in our enthusiasm for implementing the Hotel Motel Fire Safety Act we achieved the sprinklering of about 80 percent of the properties in the country. Most of these were owned by major companies. There are probably thousands of hotels and motels out there that still do not comply with the sprinkler recommendations. Why, because they have never been retrofitted. I would suspect as you drive down the streets in your town, you can develop an inventory of unprotected inventories yourself. In fact, you should have that inventory as part of your pre-fire planning program because the probability of a fire and a major loss there is statistically more likely than in a sprinklered occupancy.

I remember one of our public education campaigns back in the 80s. At that time we suggested to people that when they go into a motel that they “look up and live”. That was a suggestion to look at the sprinkler head in the facility you are staying in and express some appreciation for that level of protection. Today, I can find no evidence that any of the hotel chains are necessarily demonstrating to their customers that fire protection is there and available 24 hours a day.

Obviously, we have a certain amount of difficulty in getting unsprinklered hotels up to speed. One of our greatest challenges is to decide how are we going to approach that remaining group? What about the ones that thought that they were exempt because of the various factors they were allowed in the original legislation?

One of the things I think we need to do as a fire service profession is to place more emphasis on those entities that did comply and have set fire prevention as a high priority. One of the suggestions I came up with a long time ago was to create a symbol that could be put on the literature published by that particular hotel of a fire sprinkler head labeled “stay safely”.

We need to provide a reminder to the traveling and overnight staying public that they are safer in a fully sprinklered hotel than they would be in their own home. That is a message that still needs to be reinforced over and over again.

There may well be people in fire prevention today that don't even know what I am talking about. Perhaps you did not enter the fire service until well after the MGM Grand and others. But if history has taught us anything, it is the fact that we need to go back and reinforce that message over and over again until the hospitality industry is 100 percent fully protected.

Anything less than that could still result in the events that transpired in San Diego. A fire. An evacuation. Potential loss of life and property. All of this can be avoided by remodeling hotels and



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having them retrofit the sprinkler system technology. It is getting easier and easier and less and less expensive over time to accomplish that goal. The objective ought to be zero percent of hotels being unsprinklered.

So, take out your history books and remember that the past still remains for fire marshals and fire prevention personnel to advocate a high level of protection for the traveling public.

In summary, if we have learned our lessons from the catastrophes of the 90s, it is time to reenlist in the war on hotel motel fires. If this is new information to you, you might want to become more authoritative on the subject by reviewing the following websites:

<http://apps.usfa.fema.gov/hotel/>

<http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/index.shtm>

http://www.emergency-management.net/fire_act.pdf

<http://www.nvfc.org/archives/hotel.html>

As I was preparing this article, I was reminded of an expression my grandmother had where she would state to us “sleep tight and don’t let the bed bugs bite”. It was a cliché but it is a real problem in society today. There is a tremendous effort to try to eliminate these pesky insects. It is equally important however that sleeping tight also includes never having to face the danger of a fire in the night.