



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Insufficient Evidence

Insufficient evidence! It is a phrase you often hear on television shows involving cops and robbers and attorneys and perps. If you watch any of those genres of television you know by now that if there is not enough evidence, you don't stand much of a chance of convicting anybody in court. Circumstantial evidence is almost always looked down upon as being inadequate, ineffective and insufficient.

Well, let me put that in a totally different context – what if I was trying to collect enough evidence to prove whether you have a fire problem or not. Would you be kicked out of court for the evidence that you would drag in to show the judge about your department's fire problem? Or would he accept them as exhibits a – z as being accurate, reproducible and relevant to the case of being convicted of running a good fire department.

In the fire service we don't talk about rules of evidence very often. Granted maybe our arson investigators have run across it a few times when attempting to obtain a conviction of some individual with a propensity for burning buildings. But we don't look at what we collect by way of data in the fire service as evidence. Yet, that very data is evidence that is needed in order to justify many of the things that we want the public to invest in. By that I am referring to staffing levels, apparatus, fire stations and other components of the infrastructure that build a communities fire defense system.

What would you say if your Mayor in response to one of your budget justifications simply stated – insufficient evidence? I have been in enough budget hearings and have attended enough public hearings to feel that this is somewhat of an issue for us in the fire service. It is because of two things. I have seen politicians dismiss the fire services information because they believe that it is biased and inaccurate. I have seen city administrators dismiss fire service evidence because they believe that it is biased and incomplete. In both cases the justification for trying to seek an improvement in the fire service diminishes because of the lack of evidence to support it.

Let me replace the word evidence with records. If you really want to put the group of firefighters to sleep real quick just tell them we are going to run a class on records and reports. It is not only ho hum, it's also a bah humbug thing. Yet, when you are standing up in front of a city council attempting to add a new fire station or increase your staffing or make any kind of a major infrastructure change one of the things that they almost always hammer the fire chief with is what are the facts?

And this is the dilemma that I think that we face. For the most part we are not doing a very good job of collecting the facts. If you are not one of the kinds of chiefs that I am talking about then perhaps you can sit back and relax and enjoy the rest of this article in a sort of well – he must be talking about



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somebody else mode. But, if you have any serious doubts about whether or not you are collecting sufficient evidence to justify your decisions perhaps you should read on for a few more paragraphs.

In the Commission on Fire Accreditation's performance document there is a statement "does a fire department perform periodic appraisal of the program to make policy shifts". Often people will look at that and give themselves a check mark in the box without any serious consideration of what does that statement really mean. Well, it doesn't mean merely looking at records and then ignoring them. Appraisal of performance means looking into the information to the degree that you can determine whether it is actually measuring what you want to have measured and whether those measurements are making a difference in the outcomes of the program that it is being applied to.

Some chiefs have told me that they have discontinued doing things like monthly and annual reporting to the authority having jurisdiction because nobody reads them. Excuse me! Monthly and annual reports may or may not be for the purpose of external evaluation – they might just be an essential management tool to figure out whether you are doing your job or not. Do you think that the guy that runs the local McDonalds is totally unaware of the statistics about running his business?

One of the more pathetic examples of how bad this can get was given to me by a friend in a recent conversation. We were talking about auditing fire records and he admitted that he had worked with an officer at one point that always used the same answer to every fire. All of his fires were suspicious. All of the points of origin were unknown and the narrative limited to respond to fire, put it out – end of story.

This story might be a little bit farfetched. On the other hand what if it isn't? Would it be pathetic to realize that a fire captain out there in a fire station is deliberately ignoring their basic responsibility by misrepresenting facts that may be used to justify that fire departments next incremental improvement and infrastructure?

Well, before you say it is not happening in my fire department let me ask you a couple of straightforward questions. First and foremost is this question: are you actually reporting on an annual basis through the fire reporting system at the state and national level? If the answer is no, then you, as a department are contributing to the demise of the information to support the development of modern fire protection. Oh, I guess you could justify in your mind that you are small potatoes and that nobody cares. But if enough small potatoes are put together they can fill up a bushel basket.

So if you are participating in the fire reporting system, my next question is this: who is responsible for quality control of reviewing the reports as they are produced by the fire suppression division? If there is nobody in charge and it is considered to be a collateral duty of somebody with no degree of emphasis



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then you have no idea of how much garbage is in your record keeping system. You have little or no idea of the competency of your fire officers in addressing their responsibilities of report writing.

A third question is, if you have done the first two already then how often did you conduct a review of the data with respect to potential policy qualifications in your department? If the answer is you only look at it once a year that might be a bare minimum. But if you haven't don anything with it in the last ten years then don't expect to come up with some real grandiose information when you are challenged across the budget table about what you want to do to spend more money on your fire department.

My next question is: if you have done everything we have listed before are you compiling that into some sort of a meaningful document to transmit up to the chain of command so that we are educating our hierarchy regarding the performance of a modern fire department? By that I am referring to the fact that you don't just send up a bunch of tables, charts and graphs, but rather that we develop the skill of writing staff reports that suddenly and over time begin to inform policy makers that there are consequences of building a strong and adequate fire protection defense system.

Lastly, do you have any evidence that you are using data to actually manage any component of your fire department? In other words, is there a track record of taking information and translating it into organizational improvements or is the record keeping system essentially a repository of dead data?

Going back to my legal metaphor, if you were considered to be an attorney and you drug it into court and attempt to present the story of your department would the attorney on the other side state, "objection" and furthermore, would the judge answer, "sustained!"

Everybody knows that firefighters hate paperwork. But, those are the very same firefighters that expect fire chiefs to fall on their sword to justify decisions that cost millions of dollars to the taxpayer. There is a sufficient amount of concern in this area for us to spread around some responsibility. Everybody from the fire chief all the way down to the individual firefighter must clearly understand that we can't fabricate facts. Our problems are big enough in our community without falsifying them. We need to start regarding the record keeping responsibility of a firefighter as being equally important as the detective in a homicide case or a prosecuting attorney attempting to take a very high court case to superior court. This is not a game we are in. It is competition for public trust and public investment.

The opposite of insufficient evidence is when the attorney is able to hold up something in a court and say "I would like to submit exhibit A for consideration in his proceeding." That is what we need to be doing with our data. Creating supportive evidence that the data generated by our emergency calls are a reflection of the data that will be generated by subsequent emergency calls is a key factor in convincing the public policy makers that fire protection is not just a necessary evil, but an essential; infrastructure component of a modern community. It is a quality of life issue.



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Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could collect enough evidence to prosecute a case for improved fire protection?