



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The "Key" To Faster Fire Control

Will Rogers, the famous philosopher-humorist once said "I never met a man I didn't like." Recently his counterpart in our occupation was at a fire organization meeting and stated, "I've never met a door I couldn't bust!" Old Will was expressing optimism in mankind, which you may or may not agree with. But, the firefighter was engaged in wishful thinking about his future.

Forcible entry is rapidly becoming a two-part problem to the firefighter. First, unnecessary damage at the scene of fires is becoming a public relations liability to us. Secondly, there are doors, windows, and entries that are designed to keep everyone out, including us. Recognizing that the "bust and breach" technique is a potential problem many fire departments are now looking into "Lock-box" technology to reduce that problem.

Research reveals that there is a viable and gratifying rapid entry system that can easily be implemented by any fire department in the Country and at no cost to their department.

As stated earlier, the damage to a building incurred by emergency forced entry often exceeds the damage caused by the emergency itself. Additionally, the time lost due to making that forced entry can easily be a strong contributing factor to heavier fire losses, increased sprinkler water damage, and even loss of life. More and more we are seeing improvements in the strength of lock and door hardware, iron bars on windows, and in some instances, armored or attack resistant window glazings. All indications are that the future contains more of the same.

During our cities research effort, we found that a surprising number of cities had no nondestructive rapid entry system. As a result, we endeavored to find a fail-safe system, i.e. a system designed to minimize damage to private property and to eliminate serious injury to our personnel, that still provided top security of the system. This was an equally important requirement.

First, as with anything new in the fire service, the system had to be accepted as a viable alternative by our personnel . . . the men in the field who would come in direct contact with the system in the course of their work.

After experiencing approval of the plan from field personnel and the Fire Prevention Bureau, we selected a system to use. Today we credit much of the progress made in the implementation of the program to full staff participation.

The system finally approved, placed in the fire code now in use utilizes a key lock box system and security procedure designed and manufactured by the Knox Company of Newport Beach, California.



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SYSTEM OPERATION

The Knox-Box System allows specific keys to any building or secured area to be placed in a tamper proof box installed at the premises. The boxes are installed high on front access wall, in plain view of passerby's, but at a minimum height of about 10 feet. A single master key, carried by command officers, first-line apparatus and paramedic units, allows access to the specific keys to locked areas within moments of arrival. Once the area is declared out of danger, the building keys are returned to the key box and the area or building is resecured without damage. The typical fire department practice of carrying dozens of individual front door keys on apparatus has always been a poor method of rapid entry not to mention the potential legal complications.

RAPID ENTRY WITHOUT INJURY

Injuries are easily incurred by firemen attempting forced entry into a locked building. Broken doors, shattered glass, splintered door and window frames have caused untold injuries and lost man-hours in nearly every fire department. (It is interesting to note that there are no statistical data that detail the injuries, of increased fire and water damage, due to delay caused by forced entry.)

The practical use of key boxes for multi-doored buildings such as hotels, hospitals, retirement centers, schools, and rest homes is obvious. When a key box is secured at the front entrance of a building containing room and elevator keys, faster evacuation of guests is possible as well as immediate access to any room where fire or other emergency prevents the occupant from opening the door. In communities or condominium developments protected by security gates a key box installed at every gate assures immediate access to the area without wasting valuable time awaiting the arrival of a guard.

Part of our planning for a key box installation was to prevent unauthorized handling of supervised alarm and sprinkler system controls. By securing, in a key box, the keys that operate the alarm system, accidental or deliberate tampering is eliminated.

When the San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant near San Clemente was nearing completion, our department was responsible for the supervision and control of 20 sirens installed throughout the City. These sirens are to be activated only in the event of a nuclear accident or general emergency. The master control panel for the sirens was installed in our headquarters building. One of the first applications of the Knox-Box System was to secure the keys that activated the sirens, thus eliminating the possibility of false alarms.

Another of our own interdepartmental applications of the Knox-Box System has been at the City's corporate yard and warehouse. When emergency supplies are required after hours, we dispatch a man to the yard. He removes the keys from the key box allowing entry through the gate and into the



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warehouse. After supplies are obtained, he secures the building and gate again, replacing the keys in the key box.

Two businesses in San Clemente that regularly supply the department with equipment allow us entry into their stores after hours for emergency provisions. With the complete cooperation of the owners, we installed key boxes at each location, allowing us keys to the buildings. A record is kept of the supplies removed and the account is settled with the vendor later. We are now planning to expand this facet of the Knox-Box System due to the important role it will play in times of major emergency.

SYSTEM SECURITY

Early on, we concluded that nothing could be more detrimental to the rapid entry system than to have the system compromised by burglars or vandals. We were asking property owners, and building tenants to trust us with their keys, even though the keys were to be locked on their premises. We had to assure them that their keys were going to be absolutely safe locked in a Knox-Box. Since security is the essence of any rapid entry system, our policy requires key boxes to be indestructible for all practical purposes. This includes the method with which the box is secured to the building. Before anyone could destroy the box, they would have to create severe damage to the building, attracting a great deal of attention.

We felt that the system, if it were to work properly, had to be void of any outside interference. With the Knox System, we are assured that the keys issued to this department are uniquely ours. For example, a person could not use a Knox key from any other city system and expect it to work in our system at San Clemente. Judicious distribution of our own keys make the system that much more fail-safe.

The Knox Company maintains a stringent security system of it's own; recording every key and key box distributed. This system does not even allow the property owner access to the key box on his premises. When they are installed the owner calls the Fire Prevention Bureau and we personally inspect the keys before they are put into service.

We can, thus, assure ourselves as well as our citizens that even though they are entrusting us with keys to their property, those keys remain as secure in a key box as they would in the owner's possession.

The key box is only one component of the total system provided by the Knox Company. Other major components of the system include fireproof storage of documents by the Knox Company, traceable security and strict control of master key and key box distribution. Since the San Clemente Fire Department is requiring the key box device by Code, it is essential that the system had a fully UL listed key box. The key box should also be approved for connection to central station alarm circuits.

A true value of any system can be measured by the benefits it produces. A properly organized key box system offers rapid entry with security, reliability, increased productivity, faster evacuation of



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occupants, plus elimination of unnecessary property damage, and injury to firefighters. In San Clemente, we are advocating use of key boxes not only for business and gated premises, but in all high risk, high security areas throughout the City.

If the fire protection profession is to remain in the forefront of progress and technological advancement, it must be ready to implement new systems such as this that offer effective solutions to important problems.