



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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The Battle is Ours to Lose

Who is the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety? Have you ever attended any of their events? Have you ever visited their website? You should.

Why? Because, every TC/Cut and Rescue you run on in your jurisdiction has been impacted by their work. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety is a U.S. non-profit organization funded by auto insurers. It works to reduce the number of motor vehicle crashes, and the rate of injuries and amount of property damage in the crashes that still occur. It carries out basic research and produces safety ratings for each model of vehicle.

In my library is one of their publications that had a significant impact upon the installation of air bags in vehicles. The book was entitled *Air Bags: A Chronological History of Delay*. It starts off by noting that the first of a series of patents for automatic air bags to protect the occupants of motor vehicles in crashes was filed in 1952. In 1968 there was a workable solution to reduce the number of deaths from collisions. The report then goes on to enumerate the chronology of delay that kept that technology from being viable. Today – try to go out and purchase a new vehicle without air bags and seat belts. The chronology names people and places that created the wheel chock for the technology. The chronology ends in July Of 1984 stating “The Department of Transportation orders that all new 1990 model cars must be equipped with automatic restraints unless two-thirds of the nation’s population is covered by state laws requiring seat belt use by 1989.”

Why talk about something that is so far in the past? My answer is that the policy of procrastination and delay is very much a part of the fire professional world today.

For more than 30 years, fire service leaders have been working towards a goal that, until recently, was deemed by many as unachievable, a national code requirement for fire sprinklers in all residential occupancies. This new provision would include one and two-family dwellings and townhouses. Is this a new idea? Actually no! The concept of using sprinklers in homes goes as far back as the 1920’s. I have an advertisement in my collection that touts the concept of “junior sprinkler systems” being available to protect basements that was in a major magazine of the era.

The residential sprinkler movement actually began to become serious in the 1970’s with isolated communities using the technology to reduce community fire risk. Places like San Clemente, Scottsdale, Prince Georges County and Cobb County Georgia led the way. Sprinklers received a chilly reception at first. But the “ice” began to crack in the late 1980s when model codes began requiring sprinklers in larger multifamily occupancies, including hotels, motels and apartments, and the multifamily chapter of this battle came to a close in 2003, when a requirement to include sprinklers in all such occupancies was



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finally added to the International Building code (IBC). This change in the model code, which will ultimately save countless lives and prevent countless injuries, represents one of the most significant steps forward in American fire safety in modern times, and it resulted from a cooperative effort between progressive multifamily developers and our nation's fire and building code officials.

Now, the time has come to take the next, and perhaps the final, significant step forward in residential fire safety by adding a requirement to the International Residential Code to sprinkler new one – and two-family dwellings and townhouses, and that decision is largely in the hands of the American fire service.

Contrary to popular belief, our “opposition” in this case isn't really homebuilders and developers, as many would like you to believe. It's our own apathy. Remember the Pogo cartoon where he stated “ I have met the enemy- It are us! We have to be a part of the process if we want to succeed.

The International Code Council (ICC), the organization that administers the International codes, has welcomed America's fire service to participate in the development of its model codes. Fire service organizations typically qualify for voting governmental membership in ICC, which permits a minimum of 4 to a maximum of 12 individuals from an individual department to vote in the ICC code development process. When one considers that there are more than 30,000 fire departments in the United States with roughly 1.1 million firefighters staffing these departments, there's no arithmetic required to quickly see that the fire service could and should have tremendous influence over our nation's model codes. With this in mind, it's clear that the residential sprinkler battle is ours to win, or ours to lose, and on behalf of the citizens who we are charged with protecting, we simply cannot afford to lose.

This year, 2008, is THE year to win the residential sprinkler issue. Momentum is clearly in our favor. At the ICC final action hearing in Rochester, NY last May, a coalition of code officials and fire service representatives scored an unprecedented victory in the push for residential sprinkles by winning a majority vote in favor of residential sprinklers. The vote fell less than 100 votes short of the required 2/3 “super” majority that was required for the code to be changed. Why the 2/3 majority you may ask? That requirement comes from ICC's rules, and it applies anytime a membership vote at a final action hearing would overturn the recommendation of an ICC code development committee, resulting in a change to the code.

If 2 more fire officials had of been at that meeting from each of the 50 states, we would have prevailed.

A little background on the process may help explain this better. ICC's process involves two public hearings. At the first hearing, a code development committee appointed by the ICC board of directors, hears testimony and makes an initial recommendation to approve or disapprove each code change proposal that ICC receives. The ICC process grants great deference to these hearings and the



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recommendations of code development committees because individuals serving on these committees are typically regarded as experts in their respective fields, and there is an opportunity for all interested parties to testify for or against proposals in an effort to influence the committee's decision. While this process is generally "fair", the IRC deck is stacked against residential sprinkles because the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) has a longstanding agreement with ICC that permits NAHB to appoint 4 out of 11 voting members of the committee. With NAHB's opposition to residential sprinklers being no secret, it's pretty clear how their 4 appointees will vote on the sprinkler issue. This means that 6 out of the remaining 7 voting members of the committee would have to support sprinklers to win the committee vote.

Given past voting preferences of IRC code development committee members, it is predictable that the committee will reject mandatory residential sprinkler proposals at the upcoming hearing in Palm Springs this February. Consequently, overturning this recommendation at ICC's final action hearing in Minneapolis in September 2008 will once again require a 2/3 majority vote by ICC's voting governmental members. It is ours to win or lose.

The choice is up to YOU – The bottom line is fairly simple. To win the vote on residential sprinklers, the fire service needs to accomplish two things. First, we need to open the lines of communication with building officials and other code enforcers in communities across the country to gain their support of residential sprinklers. That means you. Second, every member of the American fire service needs to make a commitment to the residential sprinkler initiative by putting the Minneapolis ICC meeting on their calendar and into their travel budget. That means you too.

It is an undeniable fact; we have the numbers to win this issue if we show up. Woody Allen once said that 90% of success is just showing up. That's what we need to do

All we need now is commitment by Fire Chiefs, Fire Marshals and other fire service personnel that truly want to be part of changing America's fire problem to be there in adequate numbers to overcome the super majority.

YOUR commitment is vital. If you would like more detail on this subject you can go to a website www.IRCFireSprinkler.org to obtain more information

As I was preparing this article I was reviewing literature that is being spread around to defeat this initiative by the detractors of this concept. One of the contentions is that fires only happen in older homes – ergo, they are aren't sprinklered, so we shouldn't be sprinklering new homes.

I wonder if one could also make the argument that most car wrecks occur in older cars and therefore seat belts and air bags SHOULD NEVER be installed.



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As an advocate of the residential concept and the subject of some derision for being so, I cannot help but wonder how many people died between 1952 and 1984 that could have been saved by those devices. I constantly wonder why there is not an Insurance Institute of Residential Life Safety keeping track of the individuals and actions that are delaying this concept. The operative word here being: insurance. Why isn't that industry weighing in along side of the fire service?

Earlier the comment was made that this issue is on the front burner today and it is ours to win and lose. It is up to people like you, the reader, and your department to win or lose.

I noted when I was putting the pamphlet away from the Insurance Institute an interesting little statement on the cover page. It read: "Contents of this publication may be published whole, or in part, with attribution." That organization went on record and wanted the word to be passed along. We should be doing the same thing – spread the word.

Let's end the delay.