



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Patience, Progress and a Paradigm Shift

If you want to initiate change in the fire service, you must be prepared to pay the price for it. Most of the time, change is severely resisted at the outset. Then, it gradually takes hold and ultimately when the change occurs, everyone thinks it was their idea. If you are the person who initiates change, patience is needed. If you want the change to affect large numbers of people you must have a huge amount of patience. Therefore, if you have enough patience, you can bear witness to progress, but sometimes it takes decades. In short, it takes years and years to be an overnight success as a change agent.

Take residential sprinklers for example. The fire service just recently won a significant change in national building codes in Baltimore that has been hailed as a major milestone and justifiably so. This month's issue is being devoted to the history of this movement and that is also justifiable. We should never forget that this major shift in public policy simply would not have happened without a constant stream of advocates who stuck to the idea from day one. Patience has led to progress and we are about to witness a paradigm shift.

In the original request for editorial input, the editor suggested articles along the lines of "when I started in this industry..." So, I thought I would submit this article as a reflection of how far I have seen the fire service progress in addressing the issues that were originally stated in America Burning relative to home fire safety. If you have read that seminal document, you will discover that there was a call to start using sprinklers in residential occupancies over 35 years ago. Those that attempted to do so in the 1970's and early 1980's were considered radical, if not outright, revolutionary individuals. To see residential sprinklers be considered in the code process of today definitely qualifies as a "paradigm shift". A parallel might be those crazy people who thought that man could fly. Most of the early pioneers in flight have retreated into the mist of the past as we have progressed to commercial aviation and gone to outer space. Those that were advocates of residential sprinklers of the 1960's and 70's, are for the most part gone, but the paradigm has changed. America is better off because of it.

The City of San Clemente California was the first city to pass an ordinance on residential fire sprinklers. While it was the first city to consider such an action it was not done in a vacuum. Simultaneously, there was activity in far flung parts of this country, such as Cobb County Georgia, Prince George's County Maryland, Corte Madera California, Altamonte Springs Florida and others. Individuals such as Kathy Vernot (Slack), Bill Meyers, Harry Shaw, John Viniello, Jim Dalton, Steve Hart, Dave Hilton, and others made the commitment to move ahead. Fire officers on the ground like Lieutenant Jerry Grier, Gary Carmichael and Ed Harrod broke all the ground of the details. The idea then took thirty years to materialize. The only way that we could have arrived at where we are today is that a new generation picked up the baton and kept on going. The likes of Meri-K Appy, Vickie Pruett and Jeff Shapiro did all of the heavy lifting. Today there are literally thousands of individuals who are supporters of this concept. These are the individuals who ultimately brought the code change proposal to fruition.



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Both the pioneers and the current generation of supporters can claim credit for success, but it took both to see the vision accomplished. Today, we live in a world of overnight change in the field of electronics and communications. It is probably easy to forget that some change takes a long time. However, this paradigm shift is a watershed event. That means it is unlikely that it can be reversed at this point. That doesn't mean that the battle is over. As this article is being prepared there are emails in my in-basket announcing more resistance to the concept at state and local levels. Skirmishes will continue. We will continue to need advocates. Patience is still required for progress.

As this issue goes into the archives, we should take a few moments to reflect upon the level of commitment that it has taken to bring us to where we are today. To paraphrase an early American battle cry "the price of fire and life safety is eternal vigilance".