



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## The Power of Public Opinion

Nothing is as powerful as the force of public opinion. And, nothing shapes public opinion as much as a disaster. When the headlines in newspapers shout out, they are bold and powerful. When it gets on the 10:00 news and some suave reporter announces something of import it has the power that Marshall McLuhan predicted over thirty years of a global message of swaying opinions of thousands. When a headline or news broadcast is spread all the way across the United States, rather than merely being in a home town rag or on a local cable channel, then the shaping of public opinion can occur even more rapidly, and in some cases dramatically.

Usually, these headlines on catastrophe center on the tragedy, but seldom the solution. Rarely does it occur that a national headline speaks to the issue of how to prevent the disaster from occurring again. One such opportunity was recently created by US Today that we in the fire service should be paying very close attention to. A series of stories, published between October 7-9 described how loopholes in federal regulations allowed thousands of nursing homes to operate without the presence of sprinklers. Then on October 10, 2005<sup>th</sup> an article in USA Today, authored by Peter Eisler, was dedicated to describing how the danger that people face when a fire occurs in care facilities for the elderly was starting to resonate in the world of politics. In that article, there was a series of statements that fire chiefs and fire marshals had been saying for years that have suffered in silence. However, by the fact that they were stated by a newspaper reporter gave them the credibility of ten thousand fire chiefs and ten thousand fire marshals.

To quote specifically, it states “ It’s unconscionable that we would allow frail elderly people to be in this position, says Rep. Pete King, R-N.Y., Chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee“. Well, as they often say on late night television ...Duhhhh! The fact that the statement was made is important. But more importantly how long will that statement remain in the public eye? Unfortunately, the memory of John Q citizen is relatively short. We should be taking that article and doing everything we possibly can to leverage it in the face of our political adversaries and those who wish to detract from the fire sprinkler movement in this country. If we don’t it may well end up being just another “fire story” that results in no action at all.

For example, the battle about sprinklering these kinds of care facilities was recently fought in at least one state legislature and the position of opposition was allowed to prevail. The people who operate these kinds of businesses have almost always been able to make the argument that putting in sprinklers is just too expensive. No one ever seems to debate the costs of lives lost in balancing that equation.

The longer that argument is allowed to prevail the less likely we are to be able to resolve the problem. Granted, many local jurisdictions and some states have seen the wisdom to move ahead and make



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sprinkler systems a requirement in these occupancies. The fire chiefs in these areas and the politicians in these communities may well look at the news broadcast and merely smile, knowing full well that it is not going to happen to them.

But, the problem remains in existence and will continue to remain so unless the power of public opinion sways public policy. However, in Eisler's article he notes that Rep. King and John Larson, D-Conn., are introducing a bill to require sprinklers in all nursing homes. The article further states that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) are considering (seriously they say) a sprinkler mandate. Public opinion turning into public policy. Whatta concept.

So, what am I suggesting? In my opinion you should go find that article in USA Today, reproduce it and pin it up to your bulletin board. You should take quotes out of it and make sure that those quotes are used in community college classes – public education efforts – speeches on the subject. After all chief, it is not just your opinion anymore. That is a nationally expressed public statement that was seen by literally millions of people. If it falls off the table in the public's memory then it is not going to have as much impact.

Perhaps some national organization ought to find that reporter and bring him to a couple of national conferences and give him the visibility they deserve for having the courage to make the statement. Perhaps one of our national organizations should reach out and give that person some professional recognition to helping to shape public opinion. Perhaps we ought to have a delegation of the fire chiefs who have had the courage to pass their own local sprinkler ordinances all get together, get on an airplane and go talk to the those regulators at CMS.

What about sending a letter of support to the American Health Care Association, the nation's largest nursing home industry group urging them to support the legislation? What about stealing an idea out of the CMS strategy and publish the listing of the nursing homes in your community that do and do not have a sprinkler system. By the way Chief, in your community how many of each do you have? You might start thinking about the fact that in Eisler's article he notes that in the 18 worst fires in these occupancies, 200 people have died. That makes an average of 11 people dying in each event. Could it happen in your town next?

How could it hurt to generate a few letters to Senators and Congressmen asking them to put their energy and efforts into passing the regulations?

Have you ever heard the term "hiding your light under a bushel basket"? It is an old expression we had back in Oklahoma about the fact that if you don't toot your own horn somebody else will turn it into a funnel. At this stage of the game public opinion shapes public policy a lot more than our professional



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opinion does. Therefore, we should be doing everything we can to take articles of this nature and provide them with public visibility.

Who knows perhaps if you reproduce the article for the right state legislature with the arguments about sprinkler systems being “too expensive” will begin to erode in the face of public opinion. Who knows, if you show this article to somebody who owns one of these institutions they may have a spasm of public conscience that forces them to go out and find a way of financing the sprinkler system in their own building. Who knows, an article of this nature might find itself being read into the public record at code hearings. Who knows what the possibilities are unless we continue to beat the drum of public opinion on why fire sprinklers are one of the answers to the terrible loss of life and property in specific occupancies.

A few years ago, USA Today published a statement that said that firefighters are among the most trusted and credible of public employees. This was followed shortly thereafter by practically every business that advertised on TV trying to find some way of putting a firefighter into their product line. Firefighters have been used to sell Viagra, vitamins, hair color, fast food, and a whole host of other varieties. Maybe now it is time for USA Today to be used to help us sell our most important concept; putting sprinklers in high life safety occupancies so that the headlines in the future don't deal with tragedy as much as they deal with the unavoidable consequences of a complex modern society.

I once heard a statement that comes to mind in reviewing this opportunity. It was based on the fact that the people who produce the news are often in the best position to win an argument because they have an inexhaustible source of supply of paper and ink. The statement went something like “never start an argument with someone that buys ink by the 55 gallon drum. If public opinion starts to move in the direction of public support for the sprinkler movement, we can't buy enough public relations brochures, nor can we print up enough flyers for Fire Prevention week to equal the power of the press. If they want to help us in this endeavor, we should be encouraging them every chance we get.