



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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Simon Says

Who said this?

“Each year, approximately 6,000 Americans die needlessly as a result of fire in their homes. A majority of these victims are children or the elderly, who traditionally represent the groups most difficult to reach with safety information”

I will give you a clue. He wasn't a firefighter.

He continued

“Over the last two years, the Administration has been working with the Congress, the fire service and. Most recently, volunteer and private sector organizations to develop programs to attack this appalling situation.. While fire is local problem, reversing the staggering loss of life and property we are now experiencing demands a new partnership of federal, state, local, volunteer and private organizations”

Sound vaguely familiar so far?

I will give you another clue; he was a person that many people acknowledged when he died was one of the greatest influences over national policy for decades.

He went on to say

“I intend to take part in the formation of that partnership.”

Now there is a word that is never left on the shelf very long when the political agenda lacks adequate funding to make something really happen. Have you ever heard it in conversation in the, let's say, the last 5 years. Partnerships. What a concept.

Now we are going to get a little trickier. The next paragraph is missing a name. Can you fill it in?

“I have directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency, through \_\_\_\_\_, to accelerate the work being done between the officials of government, industry, and the fire service to promote further the use of life-saving residential residential protection systems”

He reached out by also saying



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“I have also directed that all viable fire prevention and protection techniques which have been proven effective be shared with our citizens through development of the government, industry and volunteer partnership (that word again)”

Who signed that letter? Who was the person tasked to do something about getting the ball rolling. Another Clue: Many of the current members of the fire service weren't even out of rookie Academy. In fact many of those that heard this message are long gone from their careers.

He finished up by stating

“We face a tremendous challenge in reducing the scope of our nation's fire problem. But we owe our citizens of this great county our best effort at finding solutions, and I am confident these new partnerships will be very helpful.”

Depending upon how long you have been in the fire sprinkler advocacy business you may or may not recognize that material. I have been somewhat dismayed by the fact that many of the people that are in the business today have very little memory of the battles that were fought in the days when residential sprinklers were considered to be a wild and crazy idea. But, then again, I note that almost every concept that has resulted in significant change in the fire service has taken almost 25 years to be accepted as a normal practice.

Specifically, I am referring to any technological change that requires both a shift in attitude towards that change and a commitment to act upon the technology. For example, when steam fire apparatus became available it was not only, not accepted, it was roundly rejected by the fire service. It took an entire generation to overcome the bias and prejudice against the use of the new technology.

Well, that letter I parsed out to you was written by President Ronald Reagan on February 1, 1984. The man he tasked to put the partnership together was Director Louis Guiffrida. There have been several changes in the White House since. There have been many changes in FEMA since then. Have we won the battle for the hearts and minds of the partnership that was supposed to carry the banner forward yet? I do not think so.

Nonetheless, we should not be discouraged either. If we compared the number of communities that were using residential sprinkler technology in 1984 with the number that are using it today, the numbers have increased.

As this column was being prepared I was notified of a community that has chosen to use sprinklers as part of its Master Planning process. Inch by inch, parcel by parcel we are making progress.



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My purpose of resurrecting President Reagan's letter is to remind us that we need to continue to pursue the support of our political leaders. We still have a need to continue to co-opt that partnership cadre. The war is not over; the battle is still being joined.

We need to continue to obtain endorsements from the politically powerful. We still need to make the issue of residential sprinkler a matter of public policy debate.

If we think that we have won and can coast ahead I would ask a very basic question to test that assumption. Why are we still publishing documents that attempt to dispel the myths of sprinkler operations after the technology has been on the street for 30 years? Yeah, that's right 30 years. The first sprinkler ordinances were in the 1970's. Its 2004. Where is the acceptance and the understanding that Ronald Reagan was proposing in 1984.

The answer is that some get it. Some don't. We will never be finished until the average citizen treats sprinkler with the same respect that he treats the need of smoke detection and the need for having an adequate fire department response to his home.

When that happens we can relax. Not a moment sooner.