



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Thousands of Points of Light

If you have ever flown over the United States on one of those red eye specials you might have found yourself looking out the window. If you were lucky and had a clear night you might marvel at the tens of millions of shiny lights that flicker up to you from down below. If you have ever done so, have you ever gone to the next level and contemplated that in the midst of all of those white lights there are a series of little red lights that are assigned to the front doors of fire stations? The tradition of putting a red light on the front of a fire station reportedly goes all the way back to the late 1800's when that was the form of recognizing where the local fire station was. If you think about it, there is something somewhat refreshing to remember about those early fire stations.

They were all *neighborhood* fire stations. The reality of the origins of the fire service was that most fire stations were not created by government but rather by community. As time has gone on, the governance of many of our fire departments has shifted from the good will of a group of individuals in a neighborhood, to being that of a governmental function at the city and district level mostly. Yet, the one aspect we haven't really dropped is the idea that fire stations are neighborhood assets.

A few years ago, President George Bush, came up with the concept call "a thousand points of light". The idea was that if you would light a single candle and gather collectively together with a large number of people you could shine a lot of light on a problem. Well, we might say that same thing about the fire service. The fire service is probably in the neighborhood of 100,000 points of light.

But frankly, I don't know if that number is accurate or not. Many of us have heard the statement that there are already 33,000 fire departments. Some only have one fire station. Some have an army of assets. Yet, they all have one thing in common; they are equally distributed across the landscape in accordance with the needs of their communities. In other words, fire stations are about the most readily accessible, public service facility in the entire country.

Probably the only service based occupancy that has resulted in more of them being constructed per square mile than fire stations are Starbucks or McDonalds.

The significance of this is that we, the fire service, are probably the closest to the reality of emergency services in this country than any other single form of government. Granted, law enforcement patrols the streets at night but they all go back to one or two police stations when their shift is over. We live in the same neighborhood of those we protect.

Firehouses are the pulse of America's emergency services. Yet, in many of the venues of dealing with homeland security, we have not received proper recognition for that phenomenon.



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The purpose of this column is to not start an outright criticism of the fact that we don't get enough respect (I will leave that up to Aretha Franklin and Rodney Dangerfield) but rather to talk about the reality that a fire is properly positioned could very well be the most substantial strength in any communities response to a major disaster.

I am not talking about the day-to-day fire or EMS call. In many cases the day-to-day incident in which we climb aboard our chrome and steel stallions and respond to the streets to solve somebody's problem individually is not much of an issue. We are merely expected to do that. What I am in reference to is when a catastrophic event brings the entire community to its knees.

The following table illustrates the types of events that are capable of doing just exactly that.

Type of Event	Consequence of Event
Flood event	Wide area inundation
Wind event	Destruction of Electrical power and removal of roofs
Earthquake event	Major infrastructural damage
Catastrophic HazMat event	Re-location and evacuation
Urban Wildland Interface	Evacuation and major loss of housing stock

If we go to the basic premise of why fire departments are located where they are, we find that the objective of most fire departments is to place a fire station within five minutes of travel time from just about every part of their community. That is the premise of the Standard of Cover concept that has grown so much over the last 20 years. It is also that true then that most citizens live within about a 1 ½ mile radius of walking distance to get to their local fire station. When any of those catastrophic events occur in a community and there is wide spread destruction, mayhem and chaos, it would seem logical that a fire station would be a location in which the community should be able to turn.

I know in observing many events on the news over the last ten or fifteen years, I have observed that almost all of the press conferences seem to be held on the major events tend to be in firehouse apparatus rooms. Maybe this also the reason a lot of politicians want to be seen in firehouses or on fire trucks during election times.

For this reason, every independent fire station should then be considered as a *point of light*. If planned correctly each fire station could remain totally independent of the infrastructure of the community could remain in service at the time of catastrophic events. What I am talking about here is a simple premise that a fire station could be like an anchor in a community if it is properly equipped and planned



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for the events. It's true; a station can be damaged or devastated by the event as the population. When that happens then the fire department becomes just a much of the part of a victim as anyone else. But it could also still be seen as a resource. That is what has happened in many area wide events such as Katrina and the recent tornadoes

In traveling around the country observing fire stations I have seen a wide variety of variance in the degree of independence that fire stations have. What I am referring to is the fact that a fire station may or may not have the ability to perform its job more than a 24 hour period if the community's electrical power or its overall infrastructure begins to fail. That is because many fire stations are built as if they are public facilities but without concern for 24/7/365 level of activity.

What would make a fire station totally independent? The following is a checklist of things you might want to consider in evaluating your fire stations ability to be that beacon of light. They are as follows:

- A. Does the fire station have a secure perimeter?
- B. Does it have its own emergency power?
- C. Does it have its own on-site fuel source?
- D. Does it have a stored water supply that would allow the firefighters to operate for a minimum of 72 hours if the water system went off line?
- E. Is there a cache of rations and/or survival materials available for distribution to the public in the immediate neighborhood?
- F. Is there readily available information that can be distributed to the public in the event of a predictable catastrophic event, (i.e. if you live in a hurricane area – wind events, if you live in a flood area, water events)
- G. Does the department have a standard operating procedure as to how to operate the station as a disaster center if it is the only facility still functioning?
- H. Does the department have an SOP for its own firefighters so that they have a plan in effect for their families to be sustained whenever an event occurs?
- I. Is there a secondary set of communications in place so that the department can sustain interface with the emergency operations center in the event that the phone system goes down?

There are many other items that you could probably add to that list that would “harden” a fire station as a delivery system. The point of all of this is that many people will turn to the fire service in times of need and when we are able to do so we increase our level of credibility with the community.

I know in my personal experience I have been responsible for locating sand bags during flooding events and assisting with the deployment of immunizations during flu events.



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There are some very simple types of technologies that we could be adding to fire stations to make them even more of an asset to the community under these conditions. For example, what about installing a weather station at the fire house to collect information that could be fed back to the local county or even state EOC? What about installing a local emergency broadcast radio station that could put out up to date information to the local area in the aftermath of a major event?

The fire service has always been seen as the first to arrive at most emergencies and is also regarded as being among the last to leave. Making ourselves even more valuable to the neighborhoods we serve cannot help but increase the bond we already have with those that call upon us the most often.