



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Where is your Passport?

Ellis Island is where many an individual was converted from their country of birth into a potential of becoming an American citizen. Many of the individuals who chose to migrate to this country were seeking freedoms that were otherwise being denied in their own country. One of those freedoms was economic potential. Others were running away from something as opposed to running towards something. In almost all cases, it made no difference why someone migrated, but rather the fact that they had chosen to do so.

We have some interesting migrations going on in our landscape today that are beginning to have an effect on the fire service. They are not universal. They are not always recognized when they are transpiring. But, there is a migration that's having an impact on the local fire protection that needs to be examined. What I am referencing is a concept called equity emigrants.

Fueled by an incredibly successful housing market, many individuals who have worked all their lives to live in the intercity or at least in a heavily densely populated area are seeing the price of their properties skyrocket. As they approach retirement age and know that they are going to be living on a fixed income, many families make the choice of selling off that large piece of property and moving elsewhere. I started this article based upon a very specific area here in California, but as I have examined the concept I find that it works in other parts of the country also.

What equity emigrants do is they take all of their money out of a piece of property and move to a much less densely populated area and purchase a home that has two qualities to it. The first of these is that it is usually less expensive than the one they sold - thereby giving them an opportunity to put a little money in the bank. Or, the area they are migrating from in comparison to the new area has much higher property taxes.

These emigrants are looking for a higher quality of life. Unfortunately, most of them end up being on the end of their lifecycle. Not too many equity emigrants are found between the ages of 20 to 45. However, many of them have easily seen their opportunity to become eligible for social security. What does this mean to local fire protection? Well, in some cases, it doesn't mean a darn thing. There are firefighting agencies that have seen an influx of these types of folks, but have had a minimal impact on the community because the geographical or economic conditions in the community have allowed the absorption of this population without placing any new or unnecessarily complex demands upon the fire department. In some areas, there are problems. Specifically, I am talking about that many of these equity emigrants come into a new neighborhood fully expecting the level of service to absolutely identical from where they first left. But, it isn't.



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How do I know this? Well, it's fairly simple. All you have to do is go out and look at a lot of the communities that are outside of the core urban and suburban areas and realize that most of them have a rural if not outright "wide-open spaces" component of them. When a person sells their \$900,000 house in downtown urban American, and moves into a \$700,000 castle out in the country, they sometimes bring with them biases and prejudices that go unnoticed until such time as they need to have a firefighter come to their assistance for either a fire or an emergency medical aid.

When people buy a home in these remote areas, seldom are they advised that the fire department is not as readily available as they are accustomed to. Not only that, when they are driving down the street and see a fire station with big red letters on the top, they don't know if it's a fully paid fire station - staffed by career personnel, or it's a totally volunteer fire organization that may or may not even have responsibility for a newly found home.

For one of the other interesting aspects of this problem is that many of these individuals move into homes in unincorporated areas fully expecting that they are going to receive suburban levels of service.

By now, some of you might have recognized yourself and your community. If you have, then you have my empathy. I find that many of the communities that are facing this problem often suffer from two almost mutually contradictory phenomena. In the first place, there is a high level of expectation that you provide a level of service consistent of the emigrants demand - and simultaneously you must do so with an absolute minimum of money because they are not interested in providing any tax support for fire protection.

At one level, this is downright hypocritical. At another level, it's simply just very naive. Most of the people that I have discussed this concept with who are consumers of emergency services simply don't know what they are buying into when they move into their new community. Euphoric with the idea that they're getting this brand new home in this brand new area, they seldom ask the real simple questions about the infrastructure of the community. If you are like many other folks, you can probably recall a point in time when you bought your first home and if you were raising children at that time, you were likely to have asked questions about the local school district.

But when people move into their new home in the country, they don't really think too much about that. Granted, there are individuals who move out there with medical problems that want to know something about the local hospital and may even have a lot of curiosity about the ambulance service, but fire protection as a priority in the planning for equity emigration is probably number 100 on a list of 99.

What can we or should we be doing about this? In one respect, if you're a fire chief who has experienced this phenomenon; it's not your fault. On the other hand, if you are a community that is experiencing this, it is somebody's fault. One of the things that causes it to happen is when the real



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estate and development communities markets their product to a group of individuals that are unknowingly and unwillingly participating in the development of a problem without any prior knowledge.

This is where the concept of public education takes on a totally different implication. We have grown accustomed to the idea that we must educate people on fire safety so that they can better protect themselves. But the concept of public education needs to be broadened to also include the idea that we need to make people aware of what level of service they have.

In my travels one of the things I have seen done to improve upon this level of community awareness is the idea of an annual newspaper insert. Many newspapers have the ability to produce an annual insert that consists of information on fire safety. For the most part I have seen a significant number of these things dedicated to urban wildland interface issues. But I have also seen several that have been done by volunteer fire departments and by regional fire departments to let the community know what they are getting for their tax dollars.

The way that this is instituted is to work closely with the newspaper media and work with them to seek advertising revenue to pay for the cost for its annual insert. Of course any type of one-shot operation of its nature is not going to do the job. Nonetheless, it is important that fire departments that have community expectations that are out of kilter with reality need to be doing everything they can to communicate to the community what they actually have.

Another example I might sight is that I believe that any fire department that has funding issues needs to invest a small amount of money into a feedback mechanism to everybody who is a recipient of their services. This may not be as complicated as you think. For example, having a post card that is sent to everybody who calls for your service that does nothing more than tell the customer that you are a totally volunteer fire department and you are dependent upon a very limited amount of financial resources sends a message at a time when they have their most teachable moments – they just use your services.

An even more basic level is probably a good idea for very, very poorly funded and overworked smaller agencies to have a business card on each piece of apparatus to be handed out to everybody at the scene of an emergency informing them of the type and quality of services being offered by your organization.

In all reality many fire departments just suffer this phenomenon in silence. They continue to grit their teeth fully aware of the fact that they cannot meet all of the community's expectation and hope that sooner or later the assessed valuation, or their tax base that they are working on will grow sufficiently to be able to resolve their problems. And, suffering in silence is a recognized technique. However, it



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certainly doesn't do anything to alter the outcome and it doesn't do anything to reduce the level of stress.

Recognizing the phenomenon of equity immigration into a community is step one of a recovery process. Those agencies that recognize that it is happening should be focusing a significant amount of effort and energy on educating the new immigrants as to what is really going on. Another concept – thinking outside the box – would be to contact the local welcome wagon and provide them with information that could be put in every package of information that is given to every newcomer that moves into your community.

Or, you can do nothing.

They say that luck favors the mind prepared. Therefore, those agencies that recognize that they do have an issue with this particular scenario can try one or more of the public awareness campaigns to alter the public's expectation. Which technique is it going to be for you?