



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

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Who Gives a Hoot?

Who gives a hoot? Do you give a hoot? By the way, what is a hoot?

At one level the answer to that question is; it is the sound that owls make when they are interested in communicating their presence. The phrase is used in the context of human conversation as a cliché to, more or less, define the idea that unless you speak up about something nobody knows whether you care about it or not. Giving a hoot means caring enough about something to be vocal about it.

Who gives a hoot about fire and life safety in your community? And, before you rush to judgment about which you think the answer to that question is, I would like you to contemplate an additional question. That is; **who should** give a hoot?

It is not uncommon for those of us in the fire profession to believe that it is obvious that we care about our citizens or we wouldn't be in this business. Providing for fire and life safety is, at its highest level, a game of caring and compassion. Those individuals that suffer a loss from a fire are, for the most part, not members of our profession but rather an anonymous and simultaneously very personal crowd. All of our customers fit into a category of being someone's family, somebody's friend, and in some case the victims are our own neighbors. There are not many people in our society that actually question whether or not fire and life safety is going to be extended to them under the conditions that they are living their life. That includes the rich and famous and the down and out. Even the homeless have an expectation of service. The fire service is an equity service. Everybody gets the same response. Rich man - poor man, beggar - man, thief, as it used to be described in childhood poems are our customers. Call 9-1-1 and we will be there in five minutes or less. That's our goal and it is admirable. But it is not a guarantee.

I recently had a very interesting conversation about this concept. The conversation was prompted by the fact that at a national hearing on fire codes recently there were fire officials that actually spoke out against installation of residential sprinklers.

In defense of the right for any person to express their opinion, I asked one of the opposition what his reasons were for opposing the concept. His answer was pretty straight forward. He stated that he had a hard time forcing a homeowner to take an action that was not based upon the homeowners concern over their own safety. In short, where is the outcry from the people that we are trying to protect? Where is the public support for this concept? Why aren't more homeowners at these hearings? Where are the angry wives and upset husbands? Who gives a hoot, beside us, over the lack of protection in a man's home that we have also called his castle?

Good question.



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One of the things that has often been mentioned by our adversaries the NAHB and others, is that many of the things we care about in the fire service are not priorities of discussion by the people that they are designed to protect; the consuming public. Does the public really care about what we want to see done or, do they have a common concept that we are going to come and help them under any and all circumstances and therefore there is nothing to be concerned about on their part. Have we oversold the public on the idea that just because we have a station right down the street, and that they have access to 9-1-1 systems that there is little justification for the residential sprinkler?

This is becoming one of the significant issues in terms of where we have gone with the advocacy residential fire sprinkler systems. Depending on who you talk to there are different points of view as to whether or not the consuming public really cares about residential fire safety. It has been pointed out by those that oppose residential sprinklers, that very few people are demanding residential sprinklers to be installed. You know, that is true. I don't like it, but it is true. That is unless you talk to someone that has lost a loved one. They care. They care a lot!

Several of our staunchest supporters fall into that category. They have suffered a serious loss and are doing everything they can to reverse the trend themselves. But very few in the public get to hear that message on a frequent basis.

When it is considered as an option to be put sprinklers in our dwellings there is perception on the part of some parties that the public would rather trade in residential sprinklers for a carpet upgrade or a better tile. I would ask you to give consideration to what you think is the reality of that question.

One can hardly watch television anymore without seeing something that has to do with caring for people who are under stress. Who could possibly forget the "I have fallen and can't get up" ads that has resulted in demand for a mechanism to notify emergency services for the elderly. How about those ADT television advertisements regarding "your family's investment?" There have been some tremendous efforts to raise the level of consciousness of the part of the consuming public, but it would be hard for me to state that residential sprinklers are a widespread concern in personal households as this column is written.

Or is that true? Depending upon how you phrase the question and the context in which you raise the issue it has been my experience that most everybody realizes that fire and life safety is an important consideration for their family. If you have ever been in the neighborhood of a major wild land fire and had the opportunity to talk to people about their fears and anxieties, I can assure you that when people are facing the fire they all get religion. Recently, I was at the scene of a grass fire in the Sacramento area. During the event a group of houses were in the path of rapidly moving fire. The owner's of those homes, all of the sudden, became personally aware of just how important a fire break could be. I found



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out later that a neighborhood group had opposed the cutting of a firebreak in the area. They had previously opposed the project, because it was ugly. I call that foxhole religion. A lot of humans have gotten religion when bombs and shells were raining down on them. The corollary to foxhole religion is what I call fire front conversions. The higher the flame heights the more the people in the path of a fire get concerned about their future.

As we can continually move forward in upgrading society's level of fire protection we need to be paying a simultaneous courtesy to the idea that if people we are trying to protect are in full support of what we are asking them to do we need their commitment.

One might think that this is part of public education. An argument can be made that sometimes people don't know what is good for them until they have been told what the medicine is. One could also say that this is part of the political process, because only those communities that have a sense of consequence assessment do the right thing in terms of improving their level of service through adoption of codes and ordinances. In almost all cases in a representative government the actions taken by those that are in an elected position are considered to be part of community awareness. Therefore, those areas that have taken action to adopt things such as sprinkler ordinances and other modern fire protection mitigation measures are a direct reflection of public concern.

The phrase "we never saw it coming" is almost always an admission that something has happened without a warning. Unfortunately, often warnings go unheeded until such time as they turn into a tragedy. It sure sounds like a double edged sword to me. And that places a premium on the concept of public education. No one in your community should be able to use that last phrase as an excuse.

As the debate continues to occur over the desirability and the utilization of residential sprinkler technology the consuming public needs to be brought closer and closer into this discussion.

How can we do that? The answer is found in the fundamentals of almost all advocacy groups. It is in the commitment of those that have the most to lose. Look at Mother Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Did law enforcement create that organization? No – it was created by a more powerful force. That force was angry mothers. They have a campaign to eliminate drunk driving that has a series of elements that they stick to in their story telling: high-visibility law enforcement, ignition interlock, advanced vehicle technologies and public support. No frills just 4 things they are pursuing with a vengeance.

I can only wish that someday mother will get MADD about deaths by fire.

As I was reviewing their website I was struck that the number of deaths by alcohol –related traffic crashes is an estimated 17,602. And that three out of every 10 Americans can be expected to be involved in an alcohol related crash in their lives. Those numbers can easily be related to be translated



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into workload for the EMS portion of our emergency services personnel – But, I wonder how many lives are lost in fires every year to alcohol –related fires. I know in my own career I have been on over a half dozen fires where drinking and smoking have contributed to deaths. If MADD could join our quest for making the residential world a safer place I think that would have a significant impact.

The fire service needs many more public interest and/or advocacy groups to tell the story of fire safety. These lobby groups, pressure group or special interest groups, as they are often called, can be a powerful to influence political decisions.

The general theory is that individuals must be enticed with some type of benefit to join a special interest group. Most join because they are upset about something. When individuals do not need to be a member of a particular interest group to reap the benefits of that group there is apathy. In the public's mind, most people do not consider that they need to help the fire service do its job. They expect it to be done. This is especially true if the fire service is only being measured by its response to emergencies. So there is no real incentive to join an interest group if they will receive that benefit anyway. We have to change that perception

That is where leadership and advocacy has to come from our side of this equation. That's our job. If we don't care about public education, then no one else will either. If we don't work hard to get supporters for the concept of public education it will not happen. We need to do everything we can to get the citizens to join in the chorus of concern about fire and life safety.

I remember a line in a movie once where one of the characters shouted out – "I am as mad as hell, and I am not going to take it anymore!" When we have neighborhood associations saying they are concerned about residential fire losses, then we will have community support. When we have survivors sending that message to their legislators without us being the ones that take them to the hearing, we will have community support.

Only then will we know that they give a hoot!

Now the question is; do you give a hoot? If you do one of the things that you might want to do is access one of the following resources to add to your department's ability to shape public opinion.

American Fire Sprinkler Association  
12750 Merit Drive, Suite 350  
Dallas, TX 75251  
[www.firesprinkler.org](http://www.firesprinkler.org)

American Society of Sanitary Engineers



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901 Canterbury Road  
Westlake, Ohio, 44145-1480  
[www.qsse.plumbing.org](http://www.qsse.plumbing.org)

Center for Campus Fire Safety  
10 State Street  
Newburyport, Massachusetts, 01950  
[www.campusfiresafety.org](http://www.campusfiresafety.org)

Home Safety Council  
1250 Eye Street, NW  
Suite 100  
Washington D.C. 20005  
[www.homesafetycouncil.org](http://www.homesafetycouncil.org)  
[www.mysafefhome.org](http://www.mysafefhome.org)

International Residential Code Fire Sprinkler Coalition  
8207 Asmara Drive  
Austin Texas 78750  
[www.ircfiresprinkler.org](http://www.ircfiresprinkler.org)

Institution of Fire Engineers, U.S. Branch  
PO Box 22505  
Alexandria, VA 22304  
[www.ifeusa.org](http://www.ifeusa.org)

Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Services  
101 Monroe Street  
12<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Rockville, MD 20850  
[www.mcfrrs.org](http://www.mcfrrs.org)

National Fire Sprinkler Association  
P.O. Box 810  
Warrenton, VA 20188  
[www.nfsa.org](http://www.nfsa.org)

NFPA  
1 Batterymarch Park



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Quincy, MA 02169

[www.nfpa.org](http://www.nfpa.org)

[www.firesprinklerinitiative.org](http://www.firesprinklerinitiative.org)

PARADE

Michael T. Love

3400 John Carroll Drive

Olney, Maryland 20832

Phoenix Society of Burn Survivors

1835 RW Berends Dr. SW

Grand Rapids, MI 49519

[www.phoenix-society.org](http://www.phoenix-society.org)

If we can raise a chorus of hoots in the cities and the towns all across the country, perhaps the sound will be heard by our legislatures and our leaders in the community. The time has come to solve the fire problem.