



FIRE PREVENTION >>>

By DANIEL BYRNE

Fire Prevention Week 2009: Are You Training or Entertaining?

If You Start Preparing Now, There Is Still Time to Save a Life

Fire Prevention Week 2009 is coming around very soon (Oct. 4-10). How many fire departments are truly prepared to take advantage of this opportunity and impact their community fire problem? While no doubt fire departments will have the best of intentions this year, a great deal of money, time and effort will be misguided and the goal of reducing fires unrealized. With the steep decline in fires that started in the 1970s having planed out, and even increased in the last few years, we need to change the way we do business.

This year, banners, posters and fire engines will be displayed and pamphlets handed out in the hundreds, but they mean nothing to a person who has not been educated first. A pamphlet about fire extinguishers does nothing for someone who has not been educated on where to mount it and how to use it. While the pamphlet generates attention, it does not in itself educate the way we in the fire service need. While your department will undoubtedly record hundreds of fire prevention contacts during that week, will you have really prevented anything? Will you have educated anyone? Have you placed your money and manpower where it will make the biggest impact?

We must keep in mind that Fire Prevention Week is not only about preventing fires to save the lives of our citizens. It's also about reducing firefighter line-of-duty deaths and injuries. Reductions in fires mean a reduction in responses, which means a reduction in risk to our people. This is not just a week for public relations, but a week in which we can advance our cause and our profession as a whole.

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Take advantage of this year's Fire Prevention Week to train and educate members of your community, and make it a point to reach parents – those who control fire prevention in the home and who will reinforce your message. Use “feel-good” items such as fire hats as incentives to demonstrate a life-saving skill that can make a difference at 2 A.M.

There is still time to make the most of Fire Prevention Week and save a life, but now is the time to prepare for this important week, not on Oct. 1. Fire departments must plan to take advantage of this opportunity and put their efforts and money into programs and events that will instill in their citizens the importance of fire safety, and not just a warm and fuzzy feeling about their local fire station.

First, fire departments must educate themselves and start training their people. Obtain National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) fire reports, your state's reports and your own reports, then analyze them. What is the fire problem? Where are the fires occurring? What demographic group is most often involved? What are the leading causes of these fires? Where are victims being found, and were smoke detectors involved? How many fire-damaged homes had fire extinguishers – and how many ex-

tinguishers were found unused and charred under the kitchen sink? Do the people who will host your firehouse tours during Fire Prevention Week know?

This is an extremely important step that is overlooked, but it is nevertheless one of the most important steps in prevention, and one of the most inexpensive. Quite simply, if your people are not educated about the problem, how can they effectively educate your citizens? If you do not know what your problem is, then how can you apply the funds and manpower to efficiently help solve the problem?

Not only is this information important for your own department's education, but also for you to be an effective media contact. Most media will give more attention to local news that is in line with state and national news – in other words, big news. For example, if cooking is the number-one cause of fires in your community, by us-

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ing statistics that also show cooking as the number-one cause of fire in your state and the nation, you will be able to add more interest for the editor and the article will have more impact. Then, every time your fire-educated citizens read about cooking fires, they will be reminded of the seriousness of cooking fires and that they occur every day across your community, state and nation, costing millions. Are you communicating and educating your public effectively?

Next, determine what you want to accomplish. Do you want to prevent fires, teach fire survival after a fire has occurred or both? The answer may be obvious, yet it is one that is seldom asked and home fires continue to rise. Look at your intended Fire Prevention Week audience. If you are talking to just children, and most departments will, then you are teaching fire survival, not fire prevention. By doing this your contact numbers will be high, but so will the amount of fires you are responding to.

Make a plan to get parents involved this Fire Prevention Week. This takes some effort and planning, but it is imperative that moms and dads know and understand the messages their children are receiving so they can reinforce them at home. All it takes is one accidental smoke detector activation at home due to cooking to be dismissed by mom or dad to reverse all you have taught.

Fire extinguisher training is always a good way to attract an adult audience and

home fire safety can very easily be tied into it. Contact local churches, civic groups, major employers and neighborhood associations. While we teach the importance of knowing two ways out of every room when there is a fire, how many fire departments also teach parents the importance of knowing two ways to get to their children, especially those sleeping on upper floors? Most parents have never thought about that or feel confident they can dash down the hallway or up the stairs in an emergency – but we know better. Imagine the education your department could provide if you partner with local schools to have a fire drill during Fire Prevention Week, and then ask every child to do a project for homework that night on the fire drill they did at home, with the most creative project from each class getting a reward. Would that not be the biggest bang for your buck?

No matter what audience you have in front of you, get them up to demonstrate and practice what they are being taught. Instructor manuals tell us that students learn 50% of what they see and hear, but retain 90% of what they say while doing. Design your programs and events for maximum retention. If you are conducting an open house or other community event for Fire Prevention Week, place a gym mat and a blanket on the floor and have the children “crawl under the smoke,” each time dropping the “smoke” (blanket) lower. Move the trucks out of the bay or cordon off an area and set up

a makeshift bedroom, put the students in blacked-out goggles and have them crawl around to find their way out. Use an old grill to demonstrate the efficiency of a fire extinguisher.

If you have money to spend during Fire Prevention Week, use it to purchase items that can make a difference at 2 A.M. when their house is on fire. Purchase smoke detectors, fire extinguishers or rescue ladders. Use plastic fire hats or coloring books as incentives to participate in a skill, not just to hand out. Want to get parents involved? Little “Johnny” gets a fire hat only if mom or dad practices with a fire extinguisher. Once Johnny is seen sporting that fire hat, what do you think is going to happen next?

Always remember the very people who need your message the most are probably not the ones who will visit you. The schools that can afford field trips are probably not in the neighborhoods where you are having your fires, and the parents in these areas may not have time to take their children to visit the station. Effective fire safety programs target the people and areas that are statistically most vulnerable to fires and create ways to get out to them.

Are you training or entertaining? Is your department doing everything it can? Are your people educated on the problem so they can educate the public effectively? This is what you can be thinking about, planning for and taking action on. Start planning now, because there is still time to save a life.



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