

The Time has Come to Win the Sprinkler Battle

By Ronny J. Coleman

What is the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety? Have you ever attended any of its events? Have you ever visited its Web site? If not, you should. Why? Because, every cut-and-rescue you run on in your jurisdiction has been affected by its work.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety is an U.S.-based non-profit organization funded by auto insurers. It works to reduce the number of motor-vehicle crashes and the rate of injuries and amount of property damage in the crashes that still occur. It carries out basic research and produces safety ratings for each model of vehicle.

In my library is one of the institute's publications that had a significant influence on the installation of air bags in vehicles. The book was titled *Air Bags: A Chronological History of Delay*. It starts off by noting that the first of a series of patents for automatic air bags to protect the occupants of motor vehicles in crashes was filed in 1952. In 1968 there was a workable solution to reduce the number of deaths from collisions. The report then goes on to enumerate the chronology of delay that kept that technology from being viable.

Today, try to purchase a new vehicle without air bags and seatbelts. The chronology names people and places that created the wheel chock for the technology. The chronology ends in July 1984 stating, "The Department of Transportation orders that all new 1990 model cars must be equipped with automatic restraints unless two-thirds of the nation's population is covered by state laws requiring seatbelt use by 1989."

Why talk about something that is so far in the past? Because the policy of procrastination and delay is very much a part of the fire profession today.

For more than 30 years, fire service leaders have been working toward a goal that, until recently, was deemed by many as unachievable — a national code requirement for fire sprinklers in all residential occupancies. This new provision would include one- and two-family dwellings and townhouses. Is this a new idea? Actually no.

The concept of using sprinklers in homes goes as far back as the 1920s. I have an advertisement from a major magazine of the era in my collection that touts the concept of "junior sprinkler systems" being available to protect basements.

The residential sprinkler movement actually began to become serious in the 1970s with isolated communities using the technology to reduce community fire risk. Places like San Clemente, Calif.; Scottsdale, Ariz.; Prince George's County, Md.; and Cobb County, Ga., led the way. Sprinklers received a chilly reception at first. But the ice began to crack in the late 1980s when model codes began requiring sprinklers in larger multifamily occupancies, including hotels, motels and apartments. The multifamily chapter of this battle came to a close in 2003 when a requirement to include sprinklers in all such occupancies was finally added to the International Building Code. This change in the model code, which will ultimately prevent countless deaths and injuries, represents one of the most significant steps forward in American fire safety in modern times. And it resulted from a cooperative effort between progressive multifamily developers and our nation's fire and building-code officials.

Now, the time has come to take the next, and perhaps the final, significant step forward in residential fire safety by adding a requirement to the International Residential Code to sprinkler new one- and two-family dwellings and townhouses, and that decision is largely in the hands of the American fire service.

Contrary to popular belief, our opposition in this case isn't really home builders and developers. It's our own apathy. Remember the Pogo cartoon where he said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!" We have to be a part of the process if we want to succeed.

The International Code Council, the organization that administers the international codes, has welcomed America's fire service to participate in developing its model codes. Fire service organizations typically qualify for voting governmental membership in ICC, which permits four to 12 representatives from an individual department to vote during the ICC code-development process.

When one considers that there are more than 30,000 fire departments in the United States with roughly 1.1 million firefighters staffing these departments, there's little arithmetic required to quickly see that the fire service could have tremendous influence over our nation's model codes. With this in mind, it's clear that the residential sprinkler battle is ours to win — or ours to lose. On behalf of the residents we are charged with protecting, we simply cannot afford to lose.

This year is the year to win the residential sprinkler issue. Momentum is clearly in our favor. At the ICC final action hearing in Rochester, N.Y., last May, a coalition of code officials and fire service representatives scored an unprecedented victory in the push for residential sprinkles by winning a majority vote in favor of residential sprinklers. The vote fell less than 100 votes short of the required two-thirds super majority that was required for the code to be changed. The two-thirds-majority requirement comes from ICC's rules, and it applies anytime a membership vote at a final action hearing would overturn the recommendation of an ICC code development committee, resulting in a change to the code.

If two more fire officials from each of the 50 states had been at that meeting, we would have prevailed.

ICC's process involves two public hearings. At the first hearing, a code development committee appointed by the ICC board of directors hears testimony and makes an initial recommendation to approve or disapprove each code-change proposal that ICC receives. The ICC process grants great deference to these hearings and the recommendations of code development committees because individuals serving on these committees typically are regarded as experts in their respective fields. There is an opportunity for all interested parties to testify for or against proposals in an effort to influence the committee's decision.

Although this process is generally fair, the IRC deck is stacked against residential sprinklers because the National Association of Home Builders has a long-standing agreement with ICC that permits NAHB to appoint four of the committee's 11 voting members. With NAHB's opposition to residential sprinklers being no secret, it's pretty clear how their four appointees will vote on the sprinkler issue. This means that six out of the remaining seven voting members of the committee would have to support sprinklers to win the committee vote.

Given past voting preferences of IRC code-development committee members, it is predictable that the committee will reject mandatory residential sprinkler proposals at the upcoming hearing in Palm Springs, Calif., in February. Consequently, overturning this recommendation at ICC's final action hearing in Minneapolis in September once again will require a two-thirds-majority vote by ICC's voting governmental members. It is our to win or lose.

The choice is up to you, and the bottom line is fairly simple. To win the vote on residential sprinklers, the fire service needs to accomplish two things. First, it needs to open the lines of communication with building officials and other code enforcers in communities across the country to gain their support

of residential sprinklers. Second, all members of the American fire service need to make a commitment to the residential sprinkler initiative by putting the Minneapolis ICC meeting on their calendar and into their travel budget.

It is an undeniable fact; we have the numbers to win this issue if we show up. Woody Allen once said that 90% of success is just showing up. That's what we need to do.

All we need now is commitment by fire chiefs, fire marshals and other fire service personnel who truly want to be part of changing America's fire problem to be there in adequate numbers to overcome the super majority. For more info. visit www.ircfiresprinkler.org.

I was reviewing literature being circulated by those who wish to defeat this initiative. One of the contentions they make is that fires only happen in older homes — ergo, they are aren't sprinklered, so we shouldn't be sprinklering new homes.

I wonder if one could also make the argument that most car wrecks occur in older cars and therefore seatbelts and air bags should never be installed.

As an advocate of the residential concept and the subject of some derision for being so, I cannot help but wonder how many people died between 1952 and 1984 who could have been saved by those automotive safety devices. I constantly wonder why there is not an Insurance Institute of Residential Life Safety keeping track of the individuals and actions that are delaying the sprinkler concept. Why isn't the insurance industry weighing in along side of the fire service?

While putting away the Insurance Institute's pamphlet, I noted an interesting little statement on the cover page: "Contents of this publication may be published whole, or in part, with attribution." That organization went on record and wanted the word passed along. We should be doing the same; spread the word. Let's end the delay.

With more than 40 years in the fire service, Ronny J. Coleman has served as fire chief in Fullerton and San Clemente, Calif., was the fire marshal of the State of California from 1992 to 1999, and is the current President of the IRC Fire Sprinkler Coalition. He is a certified fire chief and a master instructor in the California Fire Service Training and Education System. A Fellow of the Institution of Fire Engineers, he has an associate's degree in fire science, a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's degree in vocational education. Chief Coleman has been a columnist with Fire Chief Magazine for 22 years and his columns are available at www.firechief.com.