



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: 2-16-07

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Our American Fire Problem: Growing Everyday

Pleasant View, TN – The numbers are staggering. The problem will not go away. New problems are built every day. Yes, we are referencing the growing fire problem in America. People are dying at alarming rates. The fire service reaction has been typical at best.

81 people have died in multiple fatality fires since Jan. 1, 2007. 81 lives lost and we accept it because we have accepted and believe that people are supposed to die in fires. Does it have to be this way?

The typical fire service response includes check your smoke alarm, change your batteries. Make an escape plan, practice it. The facts tell us that the public is not taking the typical fire prevention message seriously. The loss and suffering can be prevented, but people need to believe that it could happen to them and they need to support taking action through local requirements that will protect them.

“This problem needs a new approach,” says Shane Ray, Pleasant View Volunteer Fire Chief. “For too long we have responded to these horrifying statistics with our standard answers. When are we going to realize that they are not working? Are our fire departments doing anything different today in our communities than we did the day before the fire?”

Chief Ray looks at the fire problem statistics during his ‘Chief’s Perspective’ of the Fire Team USA National Workshop series. Interestingly, his presentation doesn’t spend too much time on the traditional canned responses. He knows that the fire service has retained that information. He offers alternative deployment options that focus on risk reduction. He states that the fire service needs to stop being hypocritical, and uses the example and question of how many in the fire service tests their smoke detectors monthly? Yes, he intentionally calls it a detector because he believes that the public tends to ignore alarms. Chief Ray stresses that it is time for us to be true leaders and change the way we approach the fire problem.

“We are experts at reciting the standard reactive solutions,” explains Chief Ray. “But each and every one of those solutions places the burden on the occupant, the citizen, the people who are dying. When are we as a fire service going to realize that the real solution is going to take more than that? When are we going to get the “experts” on the same page and debate the issues? Are we too politically correct? Are we trying to address a hard problem with soft solutions?” Let’s have the great debate.

Chief Ray emphasizes that the problem is more than statistics—they are people—and they have died in vain if we don't figure out how to be bold enough to think differently. He also highlights the current growth trends and what impact they have on a community. Over 1.7 million new homes starts are expected in 2007. Our hope lies in building those homes safer.

Fire Team USA believes that the solution involves key stakeholders and that it is the community's problem to identify its unique solution. The fire chief must lead this community team, which also includes the public policy maker, building official, fire marshal, and water purveyor. Fire Team USA invites these stakeholder teams to participate together and learn the facts so that they can decide on a proactive plan of action.

“The solution has been around for over 100 years, available in residential occupancies for over 20 years and the solution is FIRE SPRINKLERS,” adds Vickie Pritchett, Fire Team USA Project Manager and former Economic and Community Development Director. “Fire sprinklers are a missing part of the solution that takes the burden off of the occupant and they provide protection by controlling the fire before it reaches flashover.” Chief Ray says, “the purpose of NFPA 13D is to prevent flashover”. He goes on to say, “if fire sprinklers prevent flashover won't that reduce the number of civilian and firefighter deaths?”

Pritchett's segment in Fire Team USA focuses on how to mobilize the community and involve all stakeholders. Growth projections allow communities to know what is anticipated and strategic planning needs to include fire protection as one of the key quality of life areas of focus. It is important to know your numbers and to use the projected growth rate to determine how many new home starts are coming to your area. Local public policy makers have the ability to make the decisions that can ensure future tragic stories are never written.

“Two municipalities in Cheatham County passed sprinkler legislation in 2001, with the entire county following in 2006,” explains Pritchett. “Growth has not stopped in our county, builders have supported the fire sprinkler addition to the new home construction requirements and are even highlighting the fire sprinkler system as a value-added sales feature. More communities need to realize that they CAN do something to address the tragic fire death statistics through their planning and local decisions.”

Many people term Fire Team USA as a grass roots initiative because it involves the team of leaders from the participating community, and it allows the facts to speak for themselves. Resources are available that can help you understand how to make the proactive fire protection choice for your community. All links are available through www.fireteamusa.com.

“I encourage every fire official in America to reflect on the numbers and to take action,” concludes Chief Ray. “We have tried our old approaches for too long, and they are not working. The time is now for us to fight for fire sprinkler systems and to change the way we approach fire protection in the community.”

For more information on Fire Team USA, contact us at 615-533-0305, check us out on the web at www.fireteamusa.com or email us at FireTeamUSA@aol.com.

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