

Vision 20/20

Model Performance in Fire Prevention Symposium



Seniors at Risk: Creating a Culture of Fire Safety

Senior Citizen Fire Safety Task Force

Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service

Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service

- Combination Fire and Rescue System
- Protecting 500 square miles and approximately 1 million residents
- Accredited through Commission on Fire Accreditation International (CFAI)

An Epidemic of Senior Citizen Fire Deaths

- Between 2004 and 2008 fourteen of fifteen fire fatalities in Montgomery County were senior citizens over the age of 65
- In the past ten years 26 senior citizens over the age of 65 have died in fires
- All of the fire deaths to senior citizens occurred in their homes

Senior Citizen Fire Casualties and Fatalities: The Problem

- Seniors occupy 21% of County homes
- 78% of seniors between the ages of 75 and 84 live alone
- Seniors over the age of 65 experience a fire death rate nearly twice the national average
- Fire death rate jumps to three times the national average for seniors over the age 75

Senior Citizen Fire Casualties and Fatalities: The Problem

- **Montgomery County Senior Citizen Population Growth**
 - 2000 data listed 92,500 people over 65 years old
 - 2005 senior increase to over 100,000
 - 2010 senior population projected to over 112,000
 - Senior population growth in Montgomery County is 23% compared to 6.9% for all other age demographics

Senior Citizen Fire Casualties **and Fatalities: The Problem**

- Observation tells us that due to the means and will of seniors to age in place, their functionality, behavior and homes may add unique risks that are not the same as someone in their prime of life.
- More seniors are living alone beyond their capacity to function safely.

Senior Citizen Fire Casualties and Fatalities; The Problem

- Decline in the Number of Caregivers
 - 80% of long term care is provided by family members.
 - Projected that as the number of seniors increase the number of care givers will decrease.

Compared to Similar Jurisdictions

- Data from similar jurisdictions indicates that from 2003 to 2006 Montgomery County experienced twice as many deaths (17) to Fairfax County (9),
- Montgomery County had three times the senior deaths as Jefferson County, KY (6),
- Over four times the senior deaths in Baltimore County (4).

One Approach

- MCFRS Fire Chief Thomas W. Carr (Retired) was concerned about the trend of casualties.
- Recommended to the County Executive that a multi-dimensional task force be established to evaluate the problem and make recommendations.
- Task forces are an excellent way to focus efforts and resources toward solving problems

Task Force Established

- In 2006 County Executive Douglas Duncan established the Senior Citizen Fire Safety Task Force
- Task Force members represented a cross section of Montgomery County demographically and by expertise.
- Two year timeline to produce a final report
- Task force met regularly

Mission of the Senior Citizen Fire Safety Task Force

The Senior Citizen Fire Safety Task Force was directed to advise the County Executive and the Fire Chief on strategies and procedures designed to reduce the risk of fire-related deaths and injuries to senior citizens in Montgomery County.

Senior Citizen Fire Safety Task Force Objectives

- Identify strategies to reduce fire risk among senior citizens
- Identify strategies to reduce fire casualties and fatalities among senior citizens
- Identify changes to building and fire codes that show awareness for the aging population and appropriate changes to incorporate safety features.

Senior Citizen Fire Safety Task **Force Objectives**

- Explore the addition of new use “independent living” group within the national building and fire model codes and standards.
- Identify new and emerging off-the-shelf technologies that bridge the gap between code-compliant new buildings and non-compliant existing buildings.
- Identify demographic changes and community changes that effect the safety of senior citizens
- Identify personal and community based procedures and requirements that senior citizens and caregivers can adopt and practice to increase senior citizen fire safety.

Summary of Senior Citizen Fire Safety Problems and Challenges

- Significant senior citizen population growth
- Continued increase in the number of senior citizens living alone with:
 - Lack of appropriate fire/smoke detection and suppression systems
 - Lack of appropriate egress from their residence
 - Lack of appropriate code and standards addressing seniors living alone

Summary of Senior Citizen Fire Safety Problems and Challenges

- Senior citizens that are immobile and isolated from assistance in emergencies
- Decline in available family members, nurses and professional caregivers for senior citizens
- Lack of senior citizen fire safety understanding and education by all stakeholders
- Continued increase in sensory and disabling mobility impairments as the senior citizen population ages

Summary of Senior Citizen Fire Safety Problems and Challenges

- Continued increase in the number of senior citizens living below the poverty line; especially minority groups
 - Lack of maintenance of residences, appliances, fire detection and suppression systems
 - Use of candles for lighting
 - Use of portable heaters
 - Use of ovens for heating

Summary of Senior Citizen **Fire Safety Problems and** **Challenges**

- Misuse of prescription drugs and alcohol
- Misuse of smoking materials
- Misuse of cooking procedures and appliances

Selected Immediate Recommendations

- Establish a senior citizen fire safety staff position for leadership in fire safety training.
- Develop a fire prevention publicity campaign to include press releases, public service announcements, video news releases, a unique MCFRS frequently asked questions site, aging featured brochures for targeted distribution, and a speakers bureau.
- Develop a specific marketing strategy for senior citizen fire safety to include community service volunteers drawn from public and private high schools.
- Require that the County develop a program to assist in the financing of the implementation of the requirement to install approved fire sprinkler systems in existing residential facilities.
- Target seniors with hearing loss or other sensory impairments to provide information and assistance with the installation of approved smoke alerting devices.

Implementation and Actions

- Established Senior Citizen Fire Safety Position
 - Funding Approved in Budget
 - One time items purchased to include vehicle
 - Office established
 - Position advertised and recruited – Candidate selected and offered the position
 - Recession – Froze Position Unfilled
 - Interim Contract Employee

One small piece of education

- Initiative to increase awareness and preventive actions by direct service providers in community
- Training and awareness program developed
- Rolf Jensen Fire Safety Grant award to fund initiative

Limitations

- Reduced funding due to recession
- The need to sustain efforts as champions come and go
- The need for organizations to focus exclusively on priority problems
- Cannot look at short term solutions – sustain efforts over many years
- Build robust performance measures and documentation of effort

Thank You!

Please contact me if you would like to
receive more information

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