Working Smoke Alarms

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City of Madison Fire Department
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES
Reduce Fire Fatalities

• In 2007, the City recorded 5 fire fatalities, the last one occurring on December 30 of that year. The one everyone remembers, and for whom the City’s smoke alarm ordinance is named, is 23-year-old Peter Talen, who died at 123 N. Bedford St. in the early morning hours of Sunday, November 18, 2007.
The Tipping Point – Bedford St. Fire

- All 6 of the house’s smoke alarms were in good working order when students moved in that August.

On the night Peter died, only one alarm in the basement was operable.
The Aftermath

• Every fatality is a tragedy, but this hit the community particularly hard. Peter was a talented, well-loved young man who made poor choices on a single night. Those choices cost him his life.
The Aftermath

- Media attention was intense.
- 3 other students in the house were injured, including Peter’s brother, Andy.
- Many blamed the landlord for not maintaining the property.
- The MFD countered with a strong argument that the occupants had disabled the alarms…and that this was a common occurrence.
The Aftermath

The outcry from media, the public, and elected officials created a platform for change.
The Objective

Create a community standard that addressed the key issue of inoperable smoke alarms.
The Ordinance

• In March 2009, the City Council passed a new smoke alarm ordinance requiring smoke alarms:
  – In each bedroom
  – In each sleeping area
  – Within six feet of each door leading to a bedroom or sleeping area of each unit
  – On each floor of the building
The Ordinance

• The smoke alarm ordinance also requires:
  – Hardwired smoke alarms w/battery backup
  – Smoke alarms powered by a 10-year lithium battery in a tamper-resistant compartment.
  – Unless otherwise specified by the manufacturer, no smoke alarm shall remain in service longer than ten years.
FORMATIVE EVALUATION
Incident Data

• Homes without operating smoke alarms place residents at a higher risk of fire death.

• The Public/Private Fire Safety Council reports that during the period of 1999-2001, 70% of fire deaths occurred in homes without working smoke alarms.
Demographics

• Madison, WI is the state capitol and home to UW-Madison.
• The City has a population of 233,209, with a student population of 42,000+.
• The level of renter-occupied housing (52%) exceeds the national average (34%)
Programming

• Passage of the ordinance was the springboard for heavy media activity.
• The Community Education Unit developed new materials for distribution and on the MFD website.
• Presentations outlining the ordinances were prepared and delivered to retailers and property owners.
Programming

- Additional educational materials included:
  - Signage on Department vehicles.
Programming

- T-shirts specific to the cause!
Audience Reach

• Media activity created widespread awareness of the ordinance.

• Comm Ed also concentrated efforts on reaching out to high-risk populations (e.g. older adults, families with young children, and people with disabilities) through a series of presentations and attendance at health & safety events.
Time Requirements

• The MFD fielded hundreds of calls regarding the new ordinance,
AND
• Hundreds more when the public learned of the grant-funded smoke alarm installation program that would provide free alarms and installation to homeowners in high-risk categories.
Time Requirements

• Contacting partner agencies to get referrals for installations. (months)
• Contacting and scheduling recipients (weeks)
• Negotiating with Fire Fighters Local 311 to allow for on-duty installation. (weeks)
• Preparing training and evaluation for installations. (weeks)
Time Requirements

• Installations were performed over a 3-year period.
  – The 1\textsuperscript{st} round was under an MFD grant award from FEMA
  – The 2\textsuperscript{nd} round was under the Vision 2020 grant.
New Data

• Evaluation instruments and one-on-one education during home installation documented the number of outdated and inoperable smoke alarms replaced and the number of new alarms installed.
New Knowledge

• In the course of publicizing the ordinance and the ensuing installation program, there was significantly greater awareness of the need to replace smoke alarms after 10 years.
  – Attributable to educational efforts and the requirements of the ordinance.
Economic Stimulus – Really!

• Smoke alarms were selling so fast that some stores (and their customers) reported shortages.
• Manufacturers were having trouble keeping up with demand.
• Amazon.com sent local customers notices that the ordinance had changed and marketed compliant alarms via e-mail.
Was this really necessary?

Photo to be added

Oh yeah!
Outcome Evaluation
New Behavior

• Since the passage of the smoke alarm ordinance and the ensuing installation program, Madison has recorded a single fire fatality.

• Statistically, “[Madison]…could expect about 2.5 fatalities per year; with the surge population from the University, potentially 8-9 fatalities over 3 years.”
New Friends

• The program offered an unprecedented opportunity for the Department to operate as a single entity.
New Friends

• What the community saw was a City agency that was offering a tangible value in the form of the alarms and magnified many times over by the intangibles of one-on-one contact and a sense that the Fire Department was compassionate, reliable and effective.
New Friends
New Friends
By the Numbers

• Alarms installed – 5,969
• Homes visited – 1,309
• Residents affected – 1,807
• Percentage of inoperable alarms found and replaced – 15%
Lessons Learned – Getting Buy-in

• The collaborative approach with possible opponents worked well.
• Everyone supported the draft language because opponents, supporters, legal counsel and technical staff worked to find common ground.
Lessons Learned – Talk to the Experts

- The original ordinance language called for “tamper-proof” alarms. Manufacturers advised there was no such thing, and the language was changed to “tamper-resistant.”
Lessons Learned – Messaging

• From the day that Peter Talen died, smoke alarms became the focus of every MFD message.
• The MFD generated 37 news stories and interviews in the local media specifically about smoke alarms.
Lessons Learned – Messaging

• Information about smoke alarms and the newly-passed ordinance was presented to groups of older adults, children, retailers, and property owners.

• The publicity, in turn, generated hundreds of calls from people wanting to learn more.
Lessons Learned – Preparing

• With ordinance passage uncertain, we delayed preparing educational materials when the effort may have been unnecessary.

• Any pre-approval work would have been well worth the effort. Information for the community and property owners must be available immediately after the ordinance adoption.
Lessons Learned – Partnering

• Elected officials, the business community, and the media were all important partners in gathering support and moving the project forward,

BUT

• Support from the Talen family gave the project its focus and momentum, contributing significantly to its success.
Peter’s Story

• 23-year-old Peter Talen died in a fire at 123 N. Bedford St. on the morning of November 18, 2007. Peter was one of 5 people to die in fires in Madison that year.

• Fire investigators noted that several smoke alarms in the house had been disabled prior to the fire.
Peter’s Story

• In the wake of Peter’s death, the City passed a new smoke alarm ordinance requiring either hard-wired smoke alarms or stand-alone alarms with a 10-year lithium battery in a tamper-resistant compartment. The ordinance was named in Peter’s memory.
Peter’s Story

• Peter’s family and friends have remained powerful advocates for fire safety and prevention. Peter was a theatre student at UW-La Crosse and members of faculty and staff there have produced a documentary – Peter’s Story.
Peter’s Story

- Peter’s Story is a moving tribute to Peter’s life, and a powerful lesson on fire prevention and life safety.
- The documentary may be viewed at: http://www.cityofmadison.com/fire/prevention/safety/smokeAlarms/