



Announcer: Welcome to CRR Radio from the Vision 20/20 Project.

Ed Comeau: Well, welcome to CRR Radio. My name is Ed Comeau, and here, we're talking today with Chief Mark Puknaitis from the Naperville Fire Department. Chief, could you take a minute and introduce yourself?

Mark Puknaitis: Sure. My name is Mark Puknaitis. I'm the fire chief of the Naperville, Illinois Fire Department. We're a fire department in the western suburbs of Chicago. We cover about 150,000 people with 10 stations, about 55 square miles. We have 10 fire suppression vehicles, eight ambulances that serve the population out of 10 fire stations, and we have about 202 members total on the fire department.

I've been the chief here for 10 years, and I'm also president of the Illinois Fire Chiefs Association and president of the Great Lakes Fire Accreditation Managers group, which is a group that assist other departments in the region of the Midwest for fire accreditation efforts through the Center for Public Safety Excellence.

Ed Comeau: The reason we're talking with the chief today is I'd like to hear more about what you're doing both in Naperville and on the state level when it comes to Community Risk Reduction, so how about we start with the Naperville Fire Department. Tell us a little bit about what CRR means to you guys out there.

Mark Puknaitis: Well, CRR is really an umbrella now of how we operate our fire department. We have realized and recognized over the last couple of years that Community Risk Reduction is really the way that the fire service needs to go. We have operated from a response mode for forever, basically, and that's what really the fire service is currently known for is our response and our response times; however, when you think about it, the 15,000 or so calls that we go on every year, the reason why we go on those calls is because something has failed.

Something, it has broken, whether it's part of the human body, somebody's heart failed, somebody's respiratory system failed, somebody got into a vehicle accident, or a mechanical system of some sort failed. There's failures, and what we have to really do is recognize what we can do to minimize those failures before they happen. When we do that, our call volume will certainly decrease in some of those risk factors that we're going to be identifying.

That's really why we embrace Community Risk Reduction. We look at it as a way of identifying risk factors around our community, and then figuring out ways or programs that we can institute in order to lower those risk factors or those incidences as time goes on. We're very excited about CRR, and we think that what we're doing here in Naperville is also going to spread to other parts of the state as well as other parts of the country in the fire service.



Ed Comeau:

Now, CRR is certainly something that you don't do as a silo either. It involves partnerships, doesn't it?

Mark Puknaitis:

Absolutely. What we've done here in Naperville is we've put together a stakeholders meeting about a year ago, and that included folks from the school system, our hospitals, our business community, our seniors task force, really, a cross-section of the entire community as well as governmental officials and our partner agencies. What we've asked everybody is to brainstorm and think about what the major risk factors are. We came up with a list of what those are, and the challenge now is to develop programs that we can help to mitigate those risks. We've done a few very creative things in Naperville to help to combat some of those.

For instance, we are not immune to the drug epidemic that we're seeing across the country, and we think that one of the reasons that that problem is out there is because there's an abundance of drugs out there in the system, so we were able to put together a Prescription Drug Drop-Off Program in all of our 10 stations. Virtually, each year, we take in about 2,000 pounds, that's about a ton, of drugs every year through our Drug Drop-Off Program where people can drop off prescription drugs at any of our fire station without even going into the station. It's a big, white mailbox. It sits outside of the fire stations. There's no forms to sign. There's no contracts to sign. They don't have to meet anybody. They can just very anonymously put those drugs into those mailboxes, and then we have them taken away through a private vendor that confiscates them and incinerates them or whatever they do. That's one thing that we've done, the Drug Drop-Off Program.

What we've also done is we have a coalition that we're working with a group called KidsMatter here in Naperville. That's really dealing with the mental health crisis that we have in age groups, all age groups, but primarily children and adolescents. What we're putting together is an event later on this summer, and it deals with mindfulness, basically being aware of your surroundings, being aware of everything that's happening around you, and getting involved with putting programs together with the kids and with the teenagers in the community to show them and explain to them that a lot of the surroundings that are out there, these temptations that happen and the things that they could get involved with really could have a major negative impact on your life. We think that by putting programs like that into place, that will help to lower the number of incidents that we're seeing, especially in mental health.

If you look at the other end of the spectrum, we've looked at the senior community, and we have a big aging population. I think all across the country, you're seeing that, and I think that's a great thing. I know it's a great thing. But as seniors come into our city of Naperville and they're staying here and they're continuing to live here, this has become one of the most population places to retire, so we have to take care of those folks, and we have to figure out ways on



how we can combat some of the things that occur with seniors such as falls and other things related to the home.

What we've put into place are some home safety checks that seniors can sign up for. We will come out to their homes and take a look at some of the potential dangers that are in there, and while we're there, checking their smoke detectors, making sure that some of their mechanical equipment is functioning properly, and my gosh, while we're there, we might as well take their blood pressure and make sure that they're taking their medications, they have record-keeping for all that kind of stuff, and even answer any other questions that they may have. We also have CPR classes and classes on how to use our automatic external defibrillators within the community. There's a lot of ideas that are out there right now that are centered around seniors as well.

We're using public event messaging. We are putting together, once a month, a message to our public, sometimes it's seasonality, it depends on what's happening in town, but ways to keep the community safe. It may be just being aware of the amount of vehicle accidents that are occurring in town and some tips on what to do when you're driving.

We're honing in on where we're seeing the major incidents in our community, and again, putting together programs that will help mitigate some of those incidents. We know we're not going to be able to eliminate all of them, but what we're hoping on is by putting these programs in place, what you will see is a trend to the lower side as time goes by. That's what we're going to be using to measure the success of some of these programs.

Ed Comeau: How have your firefighters been reacting to your CRR Programs?

Mark Puknaitis: It's amazing. When we started talking about CRR, Community Risk Reduction, and getting involved, it's kind of a new concept to the fire service. Once we explained what we were trying to do, we really got a tremendous, positive reaction from our rank and file. People on our department really love to interact with the community, with the people here, and this is a great way of continuing our wonderful reputation that we have in the community.

Engaging with the public, couple of years ago, a theme that we had in the fire department was engaging the community, and our people love to do that, and in going into people's homes, being allowed to get in there and make suggestions on things, knowing that you're helping the younger population in their struggles at times with drugs and mental health illnesses that are out there, it makes them feel good. It makes us more valuable to the community.

When you get that message out to your people that you want to be as much of a value as you can, because that helps everything that you're doing. That helps your reputation. When we're asking for equipment, when we're asking for other



resources, the city council and the general population continue to support us because we're doing these types of things. We're actually doing much, much more than just responding to emergency incidents and taking people to the hospital.

We did a poll, basically, on how many services we provide in our department. We came up with over 60 programs that we provide to the community, but how many of those programs and services are actually marketed correctly? Our goal for 2019 here is to stress Community Risk Reduction, market these programs that we have, hone in on the risk factors that are out there so that we can minimize them, monitor them, measure our progress, and then share those results with others in hopes to have a safer community and a community where people can feel that we are much more than the reactionary department. We're actually being very proactive in ways that we can eliminate or minimize some of these risk factors that we encounter and identify.

Ed Comeau:

We're going to take a quick break here, our conversation with Chief Puknaitis, and when we come back, we're going to learn more about what CRR means state-wide in Illinois.

I do want to take this moment to let you know about one of the free resources available to you on the Vision 20/20 Project's website, the Fire Safety Materials Generator. If you're doing campaigns in your community and need to create door hangers, fliers, refrigerator magnets, or social media messages, the Fire Safety Materials Generator lets you create customized materials in English or Spanish that you can print out and use. It's a great online tool where you can incorporate tested fire safety messages and use an online library of photographs or upload your own. Be sure to check it out at materialsgenerator.strategicfire.org. Again, that's materialsgenerator.strategicfire.org, and now, let's get back to our conversation with Naperville Fire Chief Mark Puknaitis and learn more about CRR and Illinois.

I'd like to switch gears a little bit here because you had mentioned the Illinois Fire Chiefs, which you are president of, I believe. What is going on there at the state level with the Illinois Fire Chiefs?

Mark Puknaitis:

We talked about how can we expand this great effort of Community Risk Reduction. Certainly, we could talk about it with our neighbors, but we have a big state here in Illinois. We have over 1,100 fire departments across the state. Most of them are in the Northern Illinois area, the Chicago metro area; however, there's fire departments that are rural, that are volunteered, and everybody has their own situation. How can we help everybody across the state?

Through our Illinois Fire Chiefs Association, we have an assessment and a consulting service, and through that service, we figured, why don't we just take



an arm of that service that we have and add to that the Community Risk Reduction part? We're starting to do that. We have put some research together, and we've put together programs and plans so that in the event that somebody from anywhere in the state wants to contact us and have us a system with Community Risk Reduction, first of all, we can give them tips on how to get started for free. We can do that, no charge, and just give them some helpful advice; however, if they don't have the staffing or the resources to conduct a professional Community Risk Reduction program if they choose to contract with us, we will do that as well. We certainly will do that as well, and not only in the Chicago metro area or anywhere in the state of Illinois. If anybody around the country wants to contact us, we will be able to help them with that as well.

We can get as a great service that we can provide because, number one, it is pinpointed to the fire service, but even more so, it is broad-based to assist communities in how they can become safer and more adaptable to the specific risk factors that are associated in their communities. That really is the first part in Community Risk Reduction. It's really to identify what your risk factors are, and they're different in every community. What I identify as risk factors are going to be totally different than someone else either in the neighboring community or somewhere that's 500 miles away.

We think that our, we know, actually, that our consultant group can assist with that, and we think that this is really going to spread like wildfire once we have a number of agencies that do this successfully and share their benefits with others.

Ed Comeau: Certainly being a fire service-based organization, that's kind of your primary audience, but would this service be of value to any other type of organization, like PD or Parks or somebody like that?

Mark Puknaitis: Absolutely. In a community, there are so many areas, agencies, organizations, and efforts that really make up that community. We don't want to just target fire agencies. It's easy for us to do that. Sometimes we get tunnel-visioned into our own area of expertise, but you're right, there are so many other areas that focus on the community in so many different ways, but the recipe is still the same. You still have to identify what those risk factors are. If it's a Park District, they have different risk factors than a police agency does and that they're trying to attend to.

Ed Comeau: Early, you mention accreditation. What kind of role does CRR play into accreditation for an agency?

Mark Puknaitis: We've been an accredited agency here in Naperville for 25 years. We've been through five cycles of accreditation. We are a beta site for some of the initial accredited agencies that are out there in United States. The Center for Public Safety Excellence has realized that accreditation is a self-improvement process.



What better way of self-improving your fire agency than to minimize the risk factors that are out there? Accreditation has always been looked upon as providing the benchmark level of service delivery to a community based on what the community's expectations are. This really, it dovetails right into that model because what we're doing here is, as asking the community. We're bringing a stakeholder's group out and saying, "What are your expectations?"

First of all, what are the major things that are happening right now that we want to try to minimize, and to what level of expectation to we want to... what goal do we want to try to achieve? Then we put programs into place in order to achieve those objectives. That's exactly what accreditation does. We have over 250 performance indicators that we have to meet, and each one of those performance indicators really has goals and objectives attached to them. How do we meet those goals and objectives that are based on so many different organizations that come into play to basically define what those performance indicators are?

What CRR is doing is that same thing, indicating what those risk factors are, which basically are areas that we can improve on, and what are the programs that we're putting into place, basically, those goals and objectives in order to mitigate those risks. It correlates perfectly, and Center for Public Safety Excellence is embracing this as they move along. I think this is going to be a huge help in gaining this message and, communicating this message, I should say, across this country to so many agencies that are out there that are ready in the accreditation process.

Ed Comeau: As we're wrapping up here, this is kind of a basic question that I ask a lot of my other guest. If one of your colleagues came up to you who's not doing CRR, and he said, "Chief, why should I do it in my agency? What benefit am I going to get out of doing CRR?" what would you say to them?

Mark Puknaitis: It doesn't matter what agency it is, if it's large or small, volunteer or full-time. Why does your department exist, I would ask them that question first. Why do you exist? They're probably going to come up with an answer that says something like, "I'm there to serve the public. I'm there to provide a service. I'm there to solve a need or a gap," and for all those reasons is the answer why you want to do Community Risk Reduction, so you've really answered your question if you ask yourself why do I exist, why am I here. It's the same reason why you want to do Community Risk Reduction.

That's really what the public wants to see. You're providing a great service to your public. You are solving problems of the highest risk factors that exist, and that's why you want to do CRR. That's why CRR is so important for any community, and that's why I believe that this is really something that is going to transform the fire service as we know it today.



- Ed Comeau: Well, we've been talking with Chief Mark Puknaitis from the Naperville Fire Department about some of the great things they're doing in Naperville and also state-wide in Illinois. We'll have some contact information in the show notes below people if people are looking for more information. I really appreciate you taking some time to chat with us today about what you're doing out there, Chief.
- Mark Puknaitis: I'm certainly happy to have the opportunity to do this. Thank you for providing a platform for getting this message out. I hope I get some questions, and we can reach out even further on this very important topic for the fire service. Ed, thank you very much.
- Ed Comeau: Oh, you're very welcome. We're in our third season of CRR Radio. You can find all of our past podcast at www.strategicfire.org/crrradio and on Apple Podcast where you can also subscribe and get each episode as it comes out. CRR Radio is edited by Rich Palmer and who's a production of the Vision 20/20 Project. My name is Ed Comeau. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time on CRR Radio.
- Announcer: Thanks for joining us on CRR Radio from the Vision 20/20 Project. For more information on Community Risk Reduction, please visit us at www.strategicfire.org.