

# Fire prevention saves money, lives

by Robert Laford

Each year, fires in the United States cause more than \$8 billion in direct losses and more than \$30 billion in total losses. Indirect losses are immeasurable.

Unfortunately, in the 30 years since Congress published its 1970 report, America Burning, the United States has remained one of the leading nations in fire-related damage and destruction.

The bottom line, say some fire officials, is that fire departments need to do a better job promoting fire prevention.

The fire service needs to persuade elected officials and the public of the seriousness of the situation. Despite the recent drop in crime, surveys show Americans feel they are more likely to be a victim of crime than a victim of a fire. Although statistics show most people will need to call the fire department for help during their lifetime, people still believe it won't hap-

pen to them.

One step fire departments can take is to work to change the attitudes of firefighters about prevention. Most firefighters will tell you they joined the fire department to fight fires, not to prevent them. Firefighters must be trained, therefore, to realize the value of prevention and public education.

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An effective fire prevention program is based, in part, on education and personnel management. The fire service is responsible for implementing both of these. Firefighters must become the ambassadors of prevention by promoting education and community support.

One way to make firefighters a bigger part of prevention programs is to adapt their day-to-day responsibilities to include community involvement promoting prevention. Another is to ask firefighters to spend less of their time on firestation busy work and more time on prevention. Put another way, fire chiefs must see to it that firefighters do not squander time that could be spent on prevention. They must make prevention a higher priority.

While property losses caused by

fire remain unacceptably high in the United States, the death rate due to fires has dropped significantly since the early 1970s. The increased use of residential sprinklers, smoke alarms, and fire-resistant building materials have all helped lower the rate.

One element of a successful fire prevention program can be as simple as talking to family members. Ten-year-old Tim Glasson of Massachusetts recently received an NFPA award after he and his family escaped from a

fire in their home.

"We had a fire safety assembly at school, and the lieutenant talked about fire and how you should talk to your family," said Glasson.

After the assembly, the boy and his family made a simple escape plan. It worked. After the fire, Glasson brought newspaper articles about how the plan had succeeded, and his class discussed it.

"I found out you can never say it's not going to happen," he told his

classmates. "If you don't have a plan, make one."

The bottom line: Successful fire-service prevention programs can save lives and communities millions in lost property.

*Robert Laford is a captain in charge of training with the Orange (Mass.) Fire Department and serves as an instructor with the Massachusetts Fire-fighting Academy and Mount Wachusett Community College.*