

# After a Serious Fire: Maximizing Media Attention to Promote Safety

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On December 10, 2003, a woman and her three children died in a house fire in rural Kansas. Seven people in Ohio died December 23, 2003 when their Christmas tree toppled onto candles. Early on Christmas Day, a husband, wife and their seven-year-old daughter perished in a house fire. Then three people in New York, including two children, and three people in Virginia, including a teenaged girl, died in fires on Dec. 30th. And this is only a partial listing.

The death toll in the latter months of 2003 seems unusually large, although only those collecting and analyzing the data can tell us if these deaths were statistically out of the norm. Regardless, these deaths mean we must rededicate ourselves to educating the public about this serious - and largely preventable - scourge in our communities. I know that's easy to say, and easy to support, but not necessarily easy to do. Many of you may already be comfortable promoting fire safety with reporters, while others may be reticent to work with the media or unclear about the right way comment after a fire. What is the best way for you - the fire chiefs of this nation - to reach your community with fire safety messages? I asked public affairs professionals in FEMA and the U.S. Fire Administration to think about that question and provide you with some strategic advice on reaching out to the media as a partner in fire education.

## **A Fatal Fire Occurs in Your Jurisdiction**

A fire, particularly a large or fatal fire, is automatically news. It meets such journalistic values as immediacy, impact, emotion and proximity. When broadcast media, which requires visuals to tell a story, get videotape of a raging fire or working firefighters, you can bet that story will be on the air. While the onsite coverage is not an opportune time to talk about the larger

story behind the tragedy, it is a good time to lay the groundwork for a follow-up story, also called a second-day story. Here are some suggestions:

Give your name and contact number to the onsite reporters and ask them to call you the next day for follow-up information. Or get the name and number of the reporters and call them the next day (do not wait more than 24-36 hours to follow up or the fire has become old news) to talk about doing a second-day story about fire prevention. Use the circumstances of the fire to tailor your "message." If there was no smoke alarm in the house, talk about the importance of smoke alarms. If there were young children harmed in the fire, talk about teaching youngsters how to escape. The closer your message is tailored to the specific fire the more likely the media will be interested.

Call broadcast reporters who were not present at the fire and invite them to a fire station to talk about the fire and how it relates to your fire safety messages. These other broadcasters will not have tape of the fire and this limits their ability to report on the fire. By inviting them to the station - or even to the site of the fire, if possible - you are giving them the visuals they need to do a story, one that hopefully includes your prevention message as well as the news about the fire. Remember - a broadcast story that focuses on the details of the fire is appropriate and expected. Your goal is to have some prevention reference, however small, into the first story and perhaps encourage a follow-up story that focuses more attention on safety than on the drama of the original event.

Don't forget newspaper reporters. They are less dependent on visuals, but more dependent on data. When approaching reporters about doing a follow-up to a fatal fire, offer them several people to interview. You, as the chief, can give an overall perspective, while the commander at the fire event can speak about the circumstances of the fire and your education or outreach liaison can talk about programs you have in place for community education. Statistics are especially helpful for newspaper reporters doing a follow-up story.

Community leaders can help you spread prevention/safety messages as well. After a fatal fire, there may be a school in mourning, a

company in shock, and a church congregation wanting to know how they can help. Your department can step in and help direct the emotion in a positive way - if done in a timely way. You may have a firefighter attend the school to talk to students about how to escape in a fire. The church may take up a collection to purchase smoke alarms for needy families. A company may reprint safety education materials for you to distribute. People are most likely to take action immediately after a tragedy. If you can channel that desire, you can do much to promote fire safety education. In addition, these types of projects or events are, in themselves, newsworthy and further opportunities for the media to be involved.

## **A Fatal Fire Occurs in a Near-by Jurisdiction**

Many of the strategies outlined above can also be used by departments that are located near, but in a different media market, than that of the fatal fire. You can point to the fire in the next city, county, etc., and tailor your message in a "we must make sure this tragedy is avoided here" tone. The "news hook" created by that fatal fire can be enough to get your local media interested in fire prevention. Remember, this must be done quickly, within a day or two of the original event. If contact is made later than that, you have lost the "news hook" and your prevention message is a harder sell.

Since your local media will not have video of the original fire, it's imperative that you offer visuals. Invite local broadcasters to your fire station. Give them an opportunity to shoot "B-roll," essentially visuals, of your firefighters preparing equipment, participating in training or providing community education. Details of your outreach or community education programs should be ready for the reporter, both print and broadcast, as well as statistics that outline the fire situation in your community. Remember, no matter what the statistics show, they are useful to the reporter. An increase in fires intensifies the importance of your safety/prevention messages, while a decrease underscores the importance of your previous community outreach.

## **A Fire Occurs Where Smoke Alarms or Planning Prevents a Tragedy**

Watch for fires where tragedy is avoided - individuals are alerted to the fire by a smoke alarm or escape with pre-planning. In these cases, the fire may have destroyed property, but no lives were lost - giving you an opportunity to underscore the positive. Yes, sometimes it seems that the media doesn't care about positive stories. In such a situation, however, the emotion of a family or person saved is likely to be a sufficient "news hook." It's most powerful if you are able to work with the fire victims when arranging to talk to the media, but this is not necessary. Your department has all the visuals and professionals needed to make a powerful statement about the importance of prevention/safety. Be sure to emphasize any efforts you've made in educating/preparing the community, and consider building on the fire event to reach out to civic groups that may be prompted by the events to partner with you. Remember, this must be done quickly - within days of the fire. After a week, the media's attention has turned elsewhere and you've lost the momentum.

## **Anniversaries of Large or Fatal Fires**

Annual anniversaries can serve as a good "news hook" to spur the media to revisit a previous fire. An anniversary of a fatal fire gives you a second chance to spread a prevention message tailored to the specifics of the event. In this case, make sure you give the media at least a week's notice that the anniversary is approaching. Again, try to arrange visuals. You can offer a trip to the station, to a training event or back to the site of the original fire. Provide a variety of speakers to be interviewed, too. Use your imagination! If you've made changes in your outreach or have had a significant change in statistics since the original event, be sure to share those. This approach to anniversaries works best on the one-year anniversary, but could also be successful at a five-year anniversary if the original event was very significant. Typically, a two-, three- or four-year anniversary doesn't work well as a "news hook."

## **Other tips:**

Don't feel that you need a public affairs officer or media training to contact reporters. There are some helpful books you can read about

working with the media. You may also attend a local course on the subject or get tips from public affairs officers who work for partner organizations, such as the mayor's office.

It's always a good idea to monitor your local media. How do they cover events? Are they interested in fire or safety? Are there any reporters you feel are particularly open to your message and could make a good partner for educating the community?

If you have trouble reaching individual broadcast reporters after a fire, call the station's assignment editor.

Have a media open house once a year to meet and get to know reporters and editors, both print and broadcast, who might be doing the bulk of the fire stories.

While it's ideal to treat all media outlets equally and provide them all with opportunities for interviews, etc., if one outlet or reporter becomes particularly accessible and helpful, consider creating a more formal partnership with his or her media outlet as a community service.

Giving inquiring reporters a "no comment" hampers relationship building. There are ways to say you can't provide information without appearing unfriendly or uninterested. All media inquiries are an opportunity to enhance community education.

You can talk about fire safety after a tragic event without blaming the victims or the community. The message can, and perhaps must, have a positive spin - a "we must work even harder to stop this from happening again" or "we can work together to make sure this kind of tragedy doesn't happen again" approach.

As fire professionals, we take each fatal fire personally. It seems as if we have failed our community in some way. A fatal fire, though, might be just the wake-up call your community needs. It could serve as a catalyst for a new or reinvigorated commitment to fire safety and prevention. You are key to this. You can help turn the tragedy of fire deaths to a triumph of a safer community.