

# The Rise of the South

## South Carolina builds a new prevention reputation



By Jim Crawford

For years, the southeast United States has represented a high-risk target area as far as fire and fire losses are concerned. But that might be starting to change. Long-time fire prevention advocates in South Carolina recently provided me with some evidence that good things are happening in their state.

At the latest PARADE (Prevention Advocacy Resource and Data Exchange) meeting, sponsored by the U.S. Fire Administration, I had a chance to speak with South Carolina State Fire Marshal John G. Reich and the state's Public Fire Safety Education Manager, Sondra Senn.

South Carolina has developed a comprehensive approach to fire safety that's worth noting—and so are the reductions in their losses. Annual fire deaths have trended from an astounding 178 in 1989 to 74 in 2008. That's the kind of solid evidence to which we in prevention aspire. We can't infer complete cause and effect between prevention programs and reduced losses, but those statistics are significant enough to indicate that something's working.

### HOW ARE THEY DOING IT?

To begin with, like many states, most of South Carolina's fires and fire deaths occur where people live: in residential properties. So the state has maintained a strong public education presence. A quick view of its Web page ([www.llr.state.sc.us/firemarshal.asp](http://www.llr.state.sc.us/firemarshal.asp)) reveals a number of specific fire safety education programs, including one for high-risk audiences in residential settings.

The specific methodology used includes the following:

1. Identifying high-risk individuals and families through the DHEC Postpartum Newborn Home Visit Program, Home Health Care, Area Councils on Aging and other community partners; and
2. Door-to-door canvassing by local fire department staff and community partners in areas presenting the greatest potential fire hazards.

Fire department crews install smoke alarms in residences, but they take it a step further, using the installation to conduct a courtesy home fire safety inspection and deliver fire safety/survival education.

If you've been monitoring fire department involvement in prevention, this program will sound familiar. But it's just one of many methods supported from a state level. Others include a fire safety curriculum for high-risk audiences, a juvenile firesetter intervention program, monthly safety messages and themes, and many more. The special school safety curriculum (the "Freddie"

curriculum) is credited with helping to reduce school-aged fire fatalities from 40 in 1989 to 9 in 2008.

### GOING BEYOND EDUCATION

South Carolina doesn't stop with aggressive support for public fire safety education. The state has actively pursued efforts to provide incentives for installation of residential fire sprinklers, including specific legislative language that deals with extra fees from water purveyors, one of the principal complaints of homebuilders nationwide. The effort includes a model ordinance for providing tax credits to homeowners that install residential fire sprinklers, which can be adopted at the local level.

South Carolina is also one of the states that passed legislation requiring cigarettes with a reduced propensity to start fires. (I can only imagine how difficult that must have been for a Southern state.) It also formed a coalition to ban novelty lighters in an effort to reduce the risks of juvenile fire-setting behaviors.

### SUPPORTING THE LSIS

These are just a few of the activities associated with South Carolina's efforts to put into active use the 16 Firefighter Life Safety Initiatives developed by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. In particular, South Carolina prevention officials recognize the relationship between prevention of fires and firefighter safety. As a result, South Carolina has developed the "Spray It Forward" program, which assists firefighters in their prevention activities by identifying educational objectives best suited for specific age groups. Each firefighter is provided with a resource manual identifying age-appropriate fire and life safety messages, and are encouraged to convey those messages to children from pre-kindergarten through high school.

Testing each of these programs would be onerous, but I think it's important to share how this one state, which used to be known for high fire loss, has begun to approach the fire problem from a variety of angles simultaneously. Something good has been happening in South Carolina, and you can't tell me it's just chance. ☺

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