

***play safe!*[®] in Action: Ontario Puts Prevention First**

Traditionally, "Job One" for fire departments has seemed obvious—put out fires. Fire prevention and public education have been important, but secondary, missions.

In Ontario, Canada, the Office of the Fire Marshal has turned this approach on its head. Today it promotes and provides public education as the *first* line of defense against fire and fire deaths.



Toronto Fire Services Public Educator Denise Hynes is part of Ontario's commitment to public education the first line of defense against fire and fire deaths.

"This is a major shift in thinking that has really started to gain momentum in the last five to seven years," says Stephen Welowszky, a district chief in fire prevention for Toronto Fire Services, which recently hosted a *play safe! be safe!*[®] workshop for 70 teachers and fire-service educators. "In my 24 years with the fire service I've really seen how they've come around to this emphasis on public education."

Toronto's public education efforts focus on groups at the highest risk. That's where *play safe!* comes in.

"Preschoolers are a high-risk group, so daycare providers are an important audience for us to reach," says Welowszky. "*play safe!*[®] is a resource we can put directly into their hands." Toronto fire educators also provide follow-up with daycares if requested, talk with parents and reinforce the messages.

The emphasis on public education and prevention is grounded in hard facts about fire. For nearly every fatal fire responded to in Ontario in the last 20 years, the average response time has been fewer than five minutes, but fires are burning hotter now, and a person who doesn't get out in the first minute or two may be trapped.

"What you do *before* we get there is crucial," explains Welowszky. Critical public education messages include having working smoke alarms, knowing what to do when the alarm goes off and responding immediately and getting out and staying out.

Data is also being used to allocate budgets toward resources that reduce fires and fire-related losses. The annual Fire Underwriters Survey Fire Insurance Grading Index provides insurers with credible data to help them develop premiums that fairly reflect the risk of loss for municipalities. The survey assigns points for the presence of a variety of resources—and gives more points for fire inspectors than for fire trucks.

Such a survey for the city of Toronto recently gave it a rating which would lead to higher insurance costs if action wasn't taken. The Toronto City Council approved the hiring of an additional 15 new inspectors last year and 100 more fire-prevention staff (inspectors and public educators) over the next four years, bringing the total fire-prevention staff to 250 people. The Council also took three trucks out of service and closed one fire hall. It wasn't an easy decision, but the data showed response time would only be marginally affected. And, 15 fire-prevention staff members cost less than one truck and the 16 staff members needed to operate that truck.

It can be difficult to directly relate such actions to results, but what is certain is that the Ontario fire-death rate is declining. In 2003 when the population was 12.3 million there were 110 fire deaths, equivalent to a fire- death rate of 8.9. In 2012 with a population of 13.4 million, there were 70 fire deaths, a fire-death rate of 5.2.

"Suppression—putting out fires—will always be important," says Welowszky. "But prevention is more cost effective, and it works."