



USING NFIRS DATA TO IMPROVE PUBLIC EDUCATION

The Austin Fire Department relied heavily on analysis of NFIRS data when deciding how to respond to a dramatic increase in fire fatalities in 2002. Previously Austin experienced on average about 4-5 fire fatalities a year, which translated to less than one death per 100,000 population. Then thirteen people died in 2003, with five deaths in the month of December alone. Four died on Christmas Eve, in two separate fires.

Intensive study of NFIRS incident reports involving fire fatalities led to one clear conclusion – almost all the structure fire fatalities occurred in buildings with non-functioning smoke alarms. Analysis of local survey data also showed that, even though most buildings in Austin have smoke alarms installed, about one-third do not work because batteries are missing, dead, or the alarm is too old.

The result of this analysis was the development of the “Put A Finger On It!” public education campaign, which features the smoke alarm mascot Freddy the Finger. This campaign encourages people to develop the habit of testing their smoke alarms monthly. A local advertising firm, Special Audience Marketing, generously volunteered time and resources to assist AFD in developing the campaign.

The campaign, which started in July 2003, already has played a role in saving lives. The number of fire deaths in Austin dropped dramatically during the past year. Furthermore, citizens contacted AFD to tell us about two separate house fires where 9 sleeping residents were alerted by smoke alarms – because they had tested their smoke alarms and changed the batteries after seeing “Freddy the Finger” reminders.

The Freddy the Finger campaign is the direct outgrowth of a problem identified through performance measurement. An article by Chief Kevin Baum in the August 2004 issue of *Firehouse* magazine titled “Performance management in public fire education” (pp. 42-49) described the development of the program in more detail.

Further information can also be found at <http://www.cityofaustin.org/fire/freddy.htm>. One of the features of this site is a link that allows people to sign up for monthly e-mail reminders to test smoke alarms. AFD encourages everyone to sign up for this service.