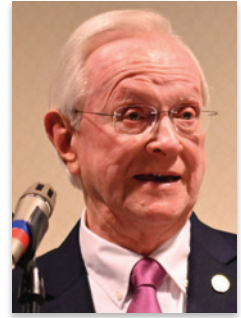


by M. H. Jim Estep, Fire Chief
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The Solution Was Right Before Our Eyes: The Birth of The Nation's First County-wide Residential Sprinkler Ordinance

From Vickie Pritchett: Prince George's County, Maryland has long been a lighthouse to so many who have come after.... we are honored to have Retired Fire Chief Estep take over this issue's "From the Fire Scene." A big thank you to Chief Estep and a long line of leaders from Prince George's County...you have led the way, and we are grateful!

Residential fire deaths were continuing to climb in our county and the department was anxious to find a comprehensive way to save more lives.

The solution was there all along, but we needed the help of a study group, our public section, and our elected officials to navigate the minefields that led to the adoption of CB-145-1987, Residential Fire Sprinkler Systems.

Prince George's County, Maryland is a sprawling area with nearly a million residents, located adjacent to Washington, D.C. In 1987, I was head of the County's Fire and EMS Department, one of the largest combination systems (career/volunteer) in the country. We prided ourselves on youthful leadership and innovation. It would take all our talents to reduce fire deaths by gaining public acceptance of bold recommendations.

Throughout my career in PGFD I had to face a multitude of challenges. None the least of which was commanding a large group of career firefighters, EMS personnel and hundreds of volunteers; a combination that left me without any dull workdays. However, when it came to reducing fire deaths in our community, all hands were readily on deck for action.

During the early 80s I was excited by the buzz surrounding the capabilities of quick activating residential sprinklers. At the behest of Sonny Scarff, the pioneering hotel fire safety head at the Marriott Corporation, I was invited to be an observer, present during Project San Francisco. This project was part of broader research being conducted by various entities, including the United States Fire Prevention and Control Administration, Marriott and the San Francisco FD.

Test fires were set on floors of a vacant mid-rise building in San Francisco, outfitted with quick activating residential fire sprinklers. The tests demonstrated the potential of the sprinklers to dramatically reduce deaths and injuries in residential spaces.

Those tests left an impression on me and I continued to think about how we could get to the point of moving forward with solutions that would involve risky political actions. Powerful forces would certainly be opposed to any attempt on the county's part

to require sprinklers in homes.

About one year before the eventual adoption of CB-145-1987, I decided to establish a research group to study the feasibility of utilizing quick activating fire sprinkler systems in all residential dwellings in our county. I asked former PGFD Fire Chief Lawrence Woltz to chair the group and PGFD Chief Fire Protection Engineer, David Banwarth, FPE, to function as Deputy to the Chair. The group was comprised of representatives from disparate organizations such as the Building Industry Association (SMBIA), IAFF, Local 1619, and the Apartment and Office Building Association (AOBA). The study group worked in unison and compiled extensive data and trial results on the efficacy of home fire sprinklers and the feasibility of duplicating the S.F. Project results in the real world. The Study Group's results were presented to me and they showed that these devices could do the job and reduce fire deaths and injuries. I accepted the report and headed to see the county's chief executive, Parris N. Glendening, The County Executive (Mayor). Mr. Glendening was later elected Governor of Maryland where he served two terms.

After my briefing, Glendening was convinced that residential sprinklers offered us an excellent opportunity to solve a difficult problem. He insisted that we must use sprinklers in conjunction with a well-staffed and trained fire department for best results. The County Executive had an uncanny sense of what the public wanted and would accept. His instincts and mine were clearly aligned on the need for sprinkler legislation.

We were delighted to get the Executive's approval to move forward. The hardest part of our department wide efforts, however, had just begun:

1. We had to convince a majority of the nine-member County Council (our legislative body) to pass a residential sprinkler ordinance. The need had to be demonstrated to the members both visually and intellectually.
2. A county-wide public education campaign had to be launched.
3. Various opposition, including the building industry, had to be brought on board or at least agree to not engage in all out public disapproval.

Under the leadership of Nancy Estep, Our Public Fire Education Section did a deep dive to create information materials, make press contacts and implement a speaker's bureau program

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throughout our five hundred square mile county. Although many opponents of the sprinkler idea were reluctant to speak out in public, the pressure behind the scenes was relentless.

Council members were convinced to travel to our Fire Training Academy and observe a demonstration that would leave an Indelible mark on the lawmakers. One test room was outfitted with smoke detectors and another with quick activating residential sprinklers. Test fires were set in each room, demonstrating how quickly fire and smoke were diminished and extinguished in the sprinklered room. Smoke detectors activated but obviously could not extinguish the fire in the second room. The Council Members had now become “disciples” for residential sprinklers.

CB-145-1987 was introduced by the County Council at the request of County Executive Glendening on October 27th. Following introduction, the bill was sent to committee and ultimately to public hearing.

The legislation would require all new residential dwellings in the county, including single family homes, to be fully sprinklered using NFPA Standard’s 13 and 13-D. Implementation would take place over a four-year period. Deputy Fire Chief Ward Caddington and Chief FP Engineer, David Banwarth presented testimony to the council on the technical aspects of the bill. They also worked with the opposition to gain their support.

An active public outreach had been launched and all components of the fire department were engaged, informing the community of how, what, why, where and when the legislation would impact on them.

Although opposition to the legislation was strong from some quarters, I will never forget a Washington Post Editorial by the newspaper, which appeared on the eve of the County Council vote. In essence it indicated, and I am paraphrasing: If this bill

passes, you can picture yourself in the kitchen fixing breakfast, and the heat sets off sprinklers above, causing water damage to your home. Need I say more?

Finally, after incredible work by a talented team the legislation was enacted by the County Council on November 18, 1987, with some incentives for builders and a longer period for implementation. Ironically, much of the principal opposition to the bill changed their minds and supported CB-145. The first county wide mandated residential sprinkler ordinance in the nation came alive when County Executive Parris Glendening signed it into law on December 11, 1987 as a model for the over three thousand counties in the country.

Hundreds of lives have been saved by the sprinkler law. The ordinance is alive and well after all this time. Thirty-seven years later, no one has succeeded in dismantling the most inspiring and satisfying work of my life.

Along the way to achieving the solution which was right in front of us, many courageous and resolute individuals made this long journey possible. Some have been mentioned in this article, here are others:

Deputy County Attorney: **Barbara Holtz**, drafted CB-145.

Invaluable Contributions:

Anthony V. DeStefano, PGFD

Major John P. “Jack” Jarboe, PGFD

Mary Helen Naecker, PGFD

James Tauber, PGFD

Ronald Milor, PGFD, Local 1619, IAFF

Harry Shaw

All members of PGFD

And so many more!•