

Minnesota Juvenile Firesetter Intervention Program (MN JFIP)

Identifying the Problem

Not only in Minnesota, but nationwide, there is a problem facing the American people that is quite terrifying. The problem is juvenile firesetting. Whether it is out of curiosity, a cry for help due to a crisis in their life, misguided or delinquent behavior, or a truly pathological situation, it affects us all. No matter what the reason for the act, the result is the same, property loss, injury, and death.

The sad fact is that most people, both in and out of the fire service, aren't aware that juvenile firesetting is not an act of "pyromania" or simply a natural harmless "fireplay". It is an extremely dangerous criminal act that in many cases could have been prevented. This is not to say all juvenile firesetters have the intent to commit a crime or create a situation which could lead to death and destruction. Indeed not, in fact 9 out of 10 juvenile firesetters honestly were not aware of the magnitude of their actions.

While some may feel that "It's normal for kid's to play with fire" or "It's just a phase they're in", the truth is that fires set by children are one of America's leading fire problems. In fact, when left untreated 81% of the children will repeat the firesetting behavior. Experience surely shows that early intervention and treatment will prevent future criminal behavior and save countless lives, injuries and property loss.

There is a great lack of understanding of the physics of fire and it's current role in society. This role has changed considerably over the years as technology has reduced it's purpose as a tool in our daily life. This lack of knowledge, coupled with the diverse characteristics of behavioral, emotional, and psychological problems young people face are but a few of the many issues relating to juvenile firesetting today.

Let's take a closer look at the problem. According to an FBI report over 53% of the arrests for arson are people under the age of 18, which is the highest percentage of juveniles involved in any crime. And if that statistic isn't staggering enough the U.S. has an average of 2.2 million fires every year, of which 1/4th are arson. During 1999 Minnesota experienced over 350 fires set by children, and suffered 2 deaths, 23 civilian injuries, 4 firefighter injuries and \$2.6 million dollars in property loss. This is truly alarming when you consider that less than 10% of fires started by juveniles are ever even reported.

Working Toward a Solution

Established in 1998, the MN JFIP is continually expanding to reach all Minnesotans. This accomplishment sincerely reflects a dedicated and committed attitude by both the State Fire Marshal and the State Legislature towards combating the growing problem relating to children and fire.

There is quite a myriad of issues pertaining to juvenile firesetting that make it a multi-discipline assignment. Developing an action plan based on statistics and demographics, coordinating inter-agency coalitions, providing training, program evaluation or enhancement modification, and maintaining a level of operational support for the coalition are all integral parts of the comprehensive program.

The basis of the program consists of a definitive sequence of intervention techniques that must be followed from beginning to end. Starting with a thorough individual and family interview and subsequent assessment, all firesetters will participate in the fire safety education course. In some cases the firesetter will be immediately directed to the appropriate referral agency. Most youth then complete a restitution program and, if necessary, are referred to mental health or social services for counseling. Intervention decisions are based on the initial findings of the interview, any

previous history, and the cooperation level of the individual and family. Careful follow-up and documentation are necessary tools to the success of this project.

The entire program is a continuous and ongoing process that is designed to provide results, results that will reduce the recidivism, thereby diminishing the morbidity and mortality rate as well as decreasing the property loss to the people of Minnesota. Together, we can make it happen. The program model was distributed in the Fall of 1999. Regional task forces are now being established and instructor training is underway.