

# White Paper #2

## AIR FORCE FIRE PREVENTION PROGRAM

The purpose of this white paper is to bring focus to the Fire Prevention Program and outline strategies to move this program to the forefront. It is not intended to criticize any individual or an installation's fire prevention program.

**History:** Some years ago, personnel reductions within the fire protection program forced leaders to make major changes in the traditional roles of fire prevention personnel. As a result of these changes, policies were changed that removed fire prevention from the facility design review process and reduced the minimum frequencies required for fire inspections. These changes were supposed to enable the remaining work to be accomplished with less people.

In retrospect, these decisions were unwise. In my view, many fire prevention personnel (including fire chiefs) took these changes as a "no confidence" vote from AF leaders. Since these changes, the fire protection program has been in a downward slide in terms of local focus and importance. It is time to renew the focus on this first line of defense.

The excellent fire safety record currently enjoyed by the Air Force was paid for in large part with the sweat of the fire prevention pioneers, giants really, before us. In the days when the Air Force developed its own standards, it was the sheer tenacity of fire prevention personnel that made sure facilities included the features necessary to protect people and property. It was fire prevention personnel that advocated for and finally achieved the adoption of national consensus standards, such as the National Fire Protection Association, for use in Air Force facilities. Now, it is routine practice – it wasn't always that way.

Fire prevention personnel were also responsible for the development of fire safety standards, such as AFOSH standards, that ensure the safety of Air Force personnel and property. It was fire prevention personnel that made sure water distribution systems were properly designed; that installed systems were installed and functioned as they were supposed to; and that design deficiencies were corrected.

I am not willing to relinquish our role in these vital areas of our fire prevention programs. The fire prevention program must be comprehensive enough to engulf everything that affects the fire safety of Air Force people and property. We cannot pick and chose. We do whatever it takes and go wherever it leads in the elimination of fire sources and the prevention of fire.

**Loss of focus:** In more recent times, the demand for fire fighters to support contingency operations has been tremendous and has affected most Air Force fire departments in the world. The loss of fire fighters to support contingencies have forced managers to do radical things so the fire fighting element (fire operations) can protect the installation. In some cases, I fear that fire managers have forgotten that fire prevention is our first line of defense. If anything, fire prevention efforts should increase when fire operations is less than fully capable. But that has not always been the case. Some managers have assigned fire fighting duties to fire prevention personnel as a primary duty. In some cases, the fire prevention shop has been shut down entirely, effectively eliminating the fire prevention program. Such actions are hard to defend, especially if the worse should happen – a death from a fire that could have been prevented. The

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first question that would be asked is “what did you do to prevent the fire,” not how well did you put the fire out. The fire prevention program focuses on preventing the fire and we are accountable for that. It is fair that we explain what actions we took to prevent a fire. I doubt that “robusting fire operations” would go very far as a good reason for not having prevented a fire that resulted in the loss of a life; certainly not for the victim’s parents, wife, or kids. It is true that we don’t start the fire but our responsibility doesn’t stop there. Our responsibility is to do whatever it takes to protect the people and property on our installation. We are and should be held accountable for that.

That is not to say that all fires will be prevented. It is unreasonable to expect that. But our focus is to not allow anything that we know about to start a fire or endanger people. It is also our job to find those things and situations that endanger people. Once we find them, we make sure they’re fixed.

This paper is not intended to minimize the importance of fire operations. But it is intended to make the point that fire operations is not the first line of defense in protecting an installation from fire. It is not the most demanding in terms of risk analysis. We don’t have fires burning all the time – but people are exposed to the hazards and situations that cause fires all the time. This fact alone indicates that we need to be doing fire prevention all the time. Additionally, it should be considered that even with reduced staffing in fire operations, most of the missions of the fire department, those that we do all the time, can still be accomplished. Certainly, fire operations may not be able to accomplish the most demanding mission, but how often does a fire occur on your installation that requires 100 percent of fire operations’ capability?

**Plain Language:** In recent years we’ve all been trained in “warm and fuzzy” and “politically correct” language that has perhaps led to a weak-kneed approach to fire prevention. Let us not confuse what we really do. We train and educate. We inspect. We enforce. We report. We document. We’re relentless. We’re akin to a junkyard dog – we don’t turn it loose until it’s dead! We are responsible to educate and train the base population. If there’s a fire, everyone needs to know about it and how to prevent it from happening again. If there’s an identified problem (hazard, practice, deficiency) that is pervasive, everyone needs to know about that too. While supervisors and managers have responsibility to dispense fire safety training, we make sure they do it and that they do it right. This is serious business. Training must be taken seriously, and be timely and focused. Annual briefings in an auditorium is not training. That’s a briefing. There’s a difference.

**Staffing:** Many will react to this paper with a “manpower” excuse. I must remind you that full staffing is seldom achieved in Air Force fire departments. In fact, risk is built into Air Force systems that prevent achievement of 100% staffing, such as manpower ceilings, inadequate manpower factors, contingencies, etc. For those that do achieve 100% staffing, enjoy it while you can – it will not last!

Air Force manpower standards authorize manpower based on a wide variety of factors. These factors do not account for everything we do, just as they do not account for everything any other shop does. The standard provides a manpower pool. The fire chief determines where to assign those people to work. If the fire chief decides to assign a person to logistics, that’s his call even

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though an individual may not specifically authorized in the manpower standard. If the fire chief decides to close the fire prevention shop and put all the people in fire operations, that's his call. However, along with this authority comes accountability. The fire chief must balance all the missions of the department and decide where to take the risk. Risk is attached to any level of staffing, whether that is 100% or 50%. The fire chief's primary role is to manage that risk. It isn't easy and is often unpleasant and controversial. But despite all the political positioning, the concern for fire fighting capability, and the desire to protect our own people, the fire chief's first obligation is to provide for the safety of the installation and all that is on it. That means fire prevention first. If that fails, then the fire chief has to be able to put the fire out. The fire chief is the commander's enforcer, advisor, and expert. We cannot afford to fail.

**CONCLUSION:** Fire prevention is the first mission of the fire protection organization. It is the top priority program in the organization. I intend to have a very aggressive fire prevention program that protects Air Force resources. Fire safety experts at all levels are accountable for their activities in this regard. We are developing a spot on our web site to serve as a clearinghouse for fire safety and prevention information and to share information. Stay tuned to <http://www.afcesa.af.mil/Directorate/CEX/Fire/default.html>.



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