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Fire Summit – June 16, 2010

Summary Report

July 19, 2010




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Introduction

On June 16, 2010, members of the police and emergency response community joined with representatives of community crime reduction groups, community leagues, school boards and the insurance industry from across the Edmonton region to tackle the issue of arson.

An increasingly prevalent crime, arson does not currently have the profile in our society that it requires in order to be addressed effectively. Yet, the impact of arson can be devastating. Central to this third Fire Summit was a conversation with Doreen Bergson, an arson victim in her eighties, who in May of 2009 lost everything to fire, as a result of an arson attack on the seniors' complex in which she lived. Her cool head and fire drill experience kept her alive during the fire, and her compassionate spirit enabled her to help other elderly people escape the inferno. Doreen lost everything – a lifetime of memories, heirlooms and family artwork. A few weeks after the fire, which completely destroyed her building, a box of glasses and cups and saucers were returned to her – all that remains of her former life.

Rebuilding a life in one's eighties is tough, she points out, "I don't just want to go shopping for new things. It's not about that. The things I miss are irreplaceable. I particularly miss the photographs". After a year of dealing with insurance claims and the logistics of replacing essentials, while managing a hip replacement and other medical challenges, Doreen remains strong and focused. When invited to tell her story to the Fire Summit, she agreed on the basis that "it might help people to understand that there are real victims of arson".

Doreen's story set a tone for the Summit that reminded all participants that arson crime has to be curbed. Participants brainstormed about arson reduction and awareness-raising and developed a set of recommendations from the day.

Background Facts

- 1 out of 3 fires are deliberately set. They are arson crimes.
- Arson has a low solvability and conviction rate.
- The motivations behind arson are complex, ranging from revenge to recognition to thrills. This complicates prevention, investigation and convictions.
- Small fire setters become big fire starters. This means they are moving along the continuum from mischief to serious crime. We must collectively take ownership of this issue, because without our attention, this crime will NOT be reduced.
- Arson is **not** a victimless crime.

Top Arson Reduction Ideas from the Summit

Raise Awareness

- The role of community officers is invaluable in spreading the word about arson.
- We need to humanize the issue. More testimonials will have an impact.
- Community engagement is central to arson reduction. Community league leaders need to be partners in problem-solving. We're all in this together.
- There has to be a broad based strategy to put arson on the map, and building it starts right away.
- Neighbourhood Watch intelligence is very important. The community knows who the troubled child fire setters are and who the people with suspicious lifestyles are. Community groups are the "on the ground" eyes and ears to assist the police service.
- Social media can be helpful. Participants talked about "going viral" with graphic imagery.
- Raising awareness with the insurance industry would add real value to the understanding of arson.

Elevate Seriousness of the Crime

- It's important to deliver the message that arson is a crime that escalates.
- It's critical to be working with youth who are fire setters and the fire setter program needs to be reinvigorated. Big arson crime begins with small arson crime and this important program needs a re-investment.
- Reporting crime is a key factor in crime reduction. The Neighbourhood crime watch map on the EPS website had been key in raising awareness about crime and encouraging reporting, arson must be added to this crime mapping tool.
- There must be a reasonable dedication of dollars to take this crime seriously. There has been an underinvestment historically.
- Prosecutors focus their attention on cases that have a greater chance of conviction.

- Is arson the right word? Deliberate fire setting of residences is equivalent to attempted murder. Should the language be more explicit about the seriousness of the crime.
- Motivations for arson are complex. Sometimes it is a crime of passion or revenge, but it remains a very serious crime and offenders need to be dealt with harshly.
- Society is soft on offenders. If there's a fire ban and someone has a backyard fire that gets out of control which results in property loss, charges should be laid.
- Participants advocated for an arson prevention bureau, regional in nature, with an interdisciplinary focus that becomes a central arson agency.
- It's important to build a more compelling case for why arson is important, and take that case to government for more resources for this issue.

Partnerships

- There has to be a commitment to arson reduction programming across the Capital Region, operating piecemeal in our individual cities and counties does not make sense. What we need is a coordinated effort that tackles this serious crime comprehensively.
- There needs to be a strengthening of the relationship between fire/police and the judicial system. The legal system is not taking arson seriously enough. Perhaps they need to be involved in future summits so they understand the seriousness of fire-related crime.
- There needs to be greater opportunities for training and interdisciplinary work between the fire and police services. Problems can be solved more effectively when addressed corroboratively.
- It's important for neighbourhoods to get to know each other and share in the accountability for keeping each other safe.

Develop Better Data

- A national database would help in tracking and surveillance of arsonist, and could also be a database of people who need help.
- We have to centralize arson information and reporting via a phone hotline.
- There needs to be better identification, tracking and sharing of data.

Summit Recommendations

1. **Develop a regional, inter-agency task force on arson, tasked to:**
 - Define the arson problem regionally.
 - Recommend a sustainable structure for addressing arson long-term (e.g. an arson bureau for the region).
 - Define the data required to support the bureau.
 - Develop a regional public awareness campaign to draw attention to arson.
 - Work with provincial and municipal governments to secure ongoing funding for the bureau.

2. **Add arson to the Edmonton Police Service's Neighbourhood Crime Map list of crimes.**
3. **Develop a regional fire and police service arson focused community engagement program that works with: schools, Community Leagues, community stakeholder groups.**

To highlight:

- Arsonist identification.
- Removal of arson temptation.
- Working with retailers on moving fire starters (lighters, matches, etc.) from view in stores.
- Building supportive neighbourhoods.
- Demonstrating the seriousness of the issue.

Appendix I – Brainstorming Ideas

RAISE AWARENESS

- Community police officers can help spread word about arson issues.
- Fire service and police services must work more closely.
- Add arson to the Edmonton Police Service neighbourhood web crime map.
- “Humanize” the issue of arson – tell victim’s stories.
- Make people aware that crime escalates and that fire starters become arsonists.
- Work with other agencies to build an arson awareness program.
- Consider the UK model of arson prevention.
- Create fire prevention programs for schools.
- Develop brochure on arson.
- Create arson page within City of Edmonton’s website.
- Have fire prevention events posted online and advertised to create awareness.
- Share statistics with the community.
- Develop key messages about arson that are targeted at “average Joe”.
- Create an arson awareness central number – make it easy for people to report crimes.
- Create social marketing program on: radio, print, transit posters, media/news groups, online, social media (Facebook/Twitter), side of buses, LRT ads.
- Work with schools on early intervention programs (e.g. DARE). Teachers know who potential arsonists are.
- Communicate about fire safe neighbourhoods, storage of gas in sheds, etc.
- Use 311 to report and track information.
- Encourage fire drills at home.
- Work with community leagues to communicate importance of issue.
- Target messaging to where arson happens (e.g. construction sites).
- Create arson awareness week to take advantage of media attention.
- Develop community involvement and trust, through:
 - o Community league meetings.
 - o Relationships between beat police.
 - o Neighbourhood Watch groups.
- Media are an important ally in raising awareness.
- Work with media on messaging. Do not let media dictate the messaging.
- Develop hotline for arson/fire related information (e.g. fridge magnet with contact number).
- Cannot just target arson, need to look at the social/cultural aspects that underlie arson.

- Develop more impactful public campaigns (e.g. Mothers Against Drunk Driving).
- Targeting risk groups for fire prevention education.
- Enhance communications between Edmonton Fire Rescue Services/Edmonton Police Services and between officers as they transition between shifts.
- Develop a roving “tailgate party” to enhance community awareness and connectedness.
- Province wide “arson watch”, tip line (such as Crime Stoppers) with a cash reward, etc.
- Develop community ownership of arson and its impact.

ELEVATE SERIOUSNESS OF THE CRIME

- Put surveillance cameras in high risk areas.
- Look at mental health implications of arson.
- Offer counseling to arsonists as part of reducing recidivism.
- Elevate consequences of the crime.
- Identify medical triggers of arson (e.g. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder).
- Punish offenders more seriously.
- Take ‘fire play’ seriously.
- Use other laws (i.e. smoking age) to prevent fires from starting.
- Develop higher degrees of responsibility for offender.
 - o Restitution.
 - o Community service.
 - o Tougher charges.
- Add attempted homicide to arson charges when life is endangered.
- Look at the language – has it become too soft?
- Investigate minor fires.

REMOVE TEMPTATION

- Clean up garbage in neighbourhoods.
- Reduce opportunity for fire to spread, through garbage clean up.
- Work with Capital City cleanup – reduce garbage, other fire hazards.
- Put locks on dumpsters.
- Have better lighting in areas where dumpster fires are a hazard.
- Education to get staff or building occupants to understand what might prevent access to potential arson (e.g. teachers not leaving flammables around or doors open for potential arson access).

- More reporting of risk factors for arson (e.g. derelict housing, etc.).
- Remove lighters/matches out of view in retail settings.
- Limit access to commercial properties (e.g. roof tops).

PARTNERSHIPS

- Community needs to see itself as part of solution.
- Create a Capital Region unified board with focus on arson prevention.
- (Insurance industry could fund this).
- Develop registry for arsonists.
- Develop education and prevention programs.
- Expand “fire setters” program.
- Look at groups other than police and fire for information/sharing – opportunities in other areas (e.g. H&W conferences).
- Look at opportunities for crime prevention through more thoughtful architectural design.
- Enforcement of “clean” neighbourhoods.
- Work with insurance industry to raise their understanding.
- Work with senior facilities to ensure least mobile people are on the lower floors.
- Collaborate at all levels.
 - o Police.
 - o Fire.
 - o Community leagues.
 - o Neighbourhood Watch groups.
 - o Crime Stoppers.
 - o Provincial Government.
- Use cell phones to capture photos of suspicious activity.
- Be aware of your community/look out your windows.
- Look further into a garbage fire – find out if it has happened to others in the community.
- Partner with school resource officers in schools (only in high school currently, what about expanding the program to junior high schools)?
- Garbage bin fires, Waste Management Department needs to be involved in resolving these issues.
- Work with retailers on alerting them to items used in arsons.
- There is a need to rebuild relationships between neighbours. Higher level of knowledge needed our communities and neighbourhoods.
- The leadership on this issue needs to come from municipalities.

- Get people to practice and take fire drills seriously.
 - o Stopping and penalizing false alarms.
 - o Conduct “fire talks” to building occupants (e.g. senior complexes).
 - o Demonstrate that complacency is a hazard.
- Bylaw enhancements to ensure parents are responsible for a youth fire setter.
- Encourage RCMP to dedicate staff to arson.

DEVELOP BETTER DATA

- Conduct better research on the issue.
- Coordinate information – provincially, nationally, and regionally.
- Use data from insurance companies to drive research.
- Raise public and political awareness of statistics and information (e.g. sentencing) about arson.
- Develop a profiling system to analyze and predict future fires.
- Increase number of fire analysts on staff at the fire service.

LEGISLATIVE SHIFTS/ATTITUDE SHIFTS

- Further changes to fire codes to reduce impact (e.g. dumpster distances, fire-proof coding, sprinklers in attics).
- Require fire drills in certain establishments.
- Enhance support to victims.
- Educate judges on seriousness of arson.
- Illustrate how significant arson is and the links between arson and homicide.
- Lobby province for legislation change allowing teachers to share information regarding students.
- Lobby for special legislation that allows for sharing of information between police & fire services (sharing of data, photographs, etc).