Course Learning Outcomes for Unit II

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

2. Describe fire prevention organizations and associations.

Reading Assignment

Chapter 2:
Public Fire Prevention Organizations and Functions

Chapter 3:
Private Fire Protection and Prevention Organizations

Unit Lesson

We have come to know that “saving lives and protecting property” is the American fire services mantra. Since the 18th century, fire prevention methods have advanced in legislative and academic achievements. Virtually every adult in America who attended public, or private, elementary and secondary schools are quite used to the annual Fire Prevention Week program presented in the schools. Since 1951, Sparky the Fire Dog has been the national mascot for fire prevention education. Typically, the firefighters from the local fire department arrive at the school during regular class hours in a bright, shiny, red fire engine. They will visit each classroom and leave coloring books, pamphlets, and other related take-away items.

After a short verbal presentation about how everyone can prevent house fires and how every home should have an escape or exit plan, the firefighters would then take students outside to view the fire engine. Often, children were allowed to sit behind the steering wheel, and, if time permitted, the fire engine was started up and a small fire hose would be charged with water from the pump to which students would be allowed to open and close the nozzle. This day was typically the most exciting event during an otherwise mundane day-at-school.

The entire visit was designed to instill a sense of understanding of how dangerous “playing with fire” is and that children, as well as adults, should never be careless with fire. The message delivered to thousands of school children nationwide has been generally well-received and equally taken to heart. National statistics kept for many decades will attest to the value of a well-constructed and properly delivered fire prevention program. There are, of course, exceptions to every rule and program; however, the overall rate of deaths and injuries attributed to carelessness with matches, flammable materials and liquids, and fire in general have declined over time.

Of course in a perfect world, there would be no injuries, deaths, loss of property, and insurance payouts; however, we know that we do not live in a world of perfection. So, what might possibly be the alternative to a society without fire prevention rules, regulations, and codes? With a slight bit of imagination one could envision a world run rampant with death and destruction by fire. Property losses would be astronomical, let alone the high loss of life. Cities and town would surely experience such conflagrations unseen since the late 19th century.

One can only imagine what this nation would look like if fire prevention laws had never been written, debated, approved, and enacted by local, state, and federal governmental bodies. Even when a society has laws in place aimed directly as the prevention of fire and loss of life there are, even in the 21st century, horrific fires that have claimed hundreds of lives. Could these catastrophes have been avoided? In many of them, the answer is a disturbing yes!
Take, for example, the February, 2003 fire at The Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island. That fire was caused when highly flammable foam plastic soundproofing panels ignited during a pyrotechnic display. It then consumed an entire building and claimed 100 lives in less than five minutes time. An estimated 200 others were injured, suffering smoke inhalation, crushing injuries when the crowd panicked in rushing to a single exit door, or suffering horrific burns attempting to flee the burning structure (Diamantes, 2016, pp. 31, 73, 96). What stands out more than anything about this fire is that the town’s Fire Prevention Officer had conducted an official inspection of the structure just days before the fire!

In testimony given later to state and federal investigators, the fire prevention officer claimed not to know of the foam panels; however, he stated his focus during the investigation was directed towards an exit door at the rear of the stage that opened into the building and not outward, as required by state fire code. How, then, did the fire prevention officer not see the foam panels that were clearly visible in pre-fire photos? What caused the officer to focus his attention solely on an exit door that opened inward and not outward (Grosshandler, Bryner, Madrzykowski, & Kuntz, 2005)?

It is likely that we will never know! Humans, while being somewhat predictable, are still unique in what they see, hear, smell, or feel, about any given scenario or setting. In the aftermath, the fire inspector gave his testimony, not once, but twice, with variations, and, in a few years after doing so, retired from his post and fire department. Only he knows the answer to the question, “why?” In hindsight, it is very unlikely that he will ever reveal why the pyrotechnic permit was issued in the first place, given that highly flammable foam plastic panels were on an entire wall surrounding that inward-opening exit door.

Of course, following that horrific 2003 fire, more laws were enacted, more regulations have been imposed, and fire prevention inspection officers have undertaken extensive education and training sessions. America is a bit more secure in the wake of each and every major incident, but what about our counterparts in other industrialized nations around the world? Let us first consider Fire Safe Europe (FSE) with principal offices in United Kingdom, Germany, and Belgium.

According to Fire Safe Europe (2011), their goal is quite comparable to those found in the USA:

To explore, develop, and encourage, which will provide the greater protection against fire. To promote awareness to ensure policy makers and other key decision makers are well informed about fire safety. To provide research and studies and best practice guidelines for fire safety. To work closely with frontline firefighters and bring their first-hand experience into policy making decisions. (para. 1-5)

These goals, or aims, of FSE are very much identical to those of their American counterparts: the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), and International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF). These government and non-government organizations work closely with public and private sector fire prevention, fire inspection, firefighters, and safety managers to ensure the safety and well-being of workers who are likely to become exposed to hazardous incidents.

Third world nations, those that are non-industrialized or under-developed, reveal an entirely different prospective with respect to fire prevention. According to Attlan (2003):

Developing countries are wide open markets that offer huge opportunities to qualified fire protection engineers. These markets do, however, present a number of challenges, including a weak regulatory framework, underdeveloped human and physical infrastructures, and a limited access to skilled labor. (para. 1)

Though this statement refers directly to “fire protection,” the same theme carries over into fire prevention. One with the other is a lost cause. For if prevention were achieved completely, the possibility that fire will occur is likely. Without a system of fire protection, fire prevention means virtually nothing.

Of all fire-related issues in Third World countries, burn prevention and treatment provokes a greater interest. According to Van der Merwe and Steenkamp (2012), “Burns represent an important health and economic problem in Africa and in the developing countries. Prevention programs in developing countries are still at an infant phase” (para. 1). Other countries cited in this report are Bangladesh and Pakistan, where acid-throwing
violence runs amuck. Here again, the overriding issue—based on this report—is not that of fire prevention but rather burn prevention, by fire or other means.

From just this short search and research, we—as Americans—have to consider ourselves very fortunate to live in a well-developed nation where human safety is not an expendable item. Rather, human lives here are given high-priority with regard to fire prevention, fire protection, and fire safety. Consider this—without codes, regulations, rules, and standards for fire prevention, our nation would most likely fall into place with lesser developed nations. In the final analysis, our nation would be reduced to little more than smoldering rubble. Without a system of recognized codes and standards, we are—in a word—ashes.

References


Suggested Reading

PPC stands for Public Protection Classification. In the article below, you will see how this rating system is used to determine the level of effectivity and efficiency of a public fire department.


In the course of your fire prevention work, you may be required to locate, read, and understand state laws applicable to fire prevention. This is in reference to Massachusetts, which is mentioned in the lecture content.