



Coffee Break Training - Fire Prevention and Public Education

Establishing Risk-Reduction Priorities

No. FM-2011-9 September 15, 2011

Learning Objective: Students will be able to identify the levels of priority concerning risks to the community.

Establishing risk-reduction priorities is based on factual data. The decisionmaking process must be based on local data and trends. Experiential information is important, but it should be used to supplement data rather than replace them. It is important to zero in on the highest risk populations. Groups affected directly by the risk must be involved in deciding the course of action to be taken to address the problem. All potential impacts to community systems, property, and people must be considered. Ultimately, decisions are made based on the community's acceptable level of risk.



Arson fires are an example of a community issue which may impact multiple areas needing immediate action.

Even if you have decided that the problem really is important and worth solving, will you be able to solve it, or at least improve the situation? The bottom line is deciding if the good you can do will be worth the effort it takes. Are you the best organization to solve the problem? Is someone working on the problem already? Always consider the negative impacts. If you do succeed in bringing about the solution you are working on, what are the possible consequences? If you succeed in having safety measures implemented, how much will it cost? There are always cost versus benefit considerations.

There are four levels of priority concerning risks to the community:

- 1. Immediate action** defines risks that have a high severity of impact to the community. Generally, they are high frequency. The impacts for this level of priority are in multiple areas of human, economic, social, political, and environmental vulnerability. Arson fires are an example of a community issue which may impact multiple areas needing immediate action. Forming a community coalition would be advisable to address issues like this.
- 2. Immediate attention** defines risks having high severity of overall impact, but the frequency of occurrence is low. The risks should be included in strategic planning for emergency services and involve the community, but may not require immediate action. Residential fires are an example of fires needing immediate attention since civilians and firefighters are at high risk to deaths and injuries. Fires that have the potential for multiple deaths such as public assemblies would also fit into this category.
- 3. Periodic attention** defines risks that have moderate severity and moderate to low frequency. These risks may be addressed by bringing attention to the problem occasionally. In some cases, these risks may be addressed without a community coalition. Mercantile occupancies with low frequency of fires would fit into this category.
- 4. Annual reevaluations** are the lowest priority risks. Generally, the impact is minor and is low frequency.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). *Leadership Strategies in Community Risk Reduction*, August 2010.

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