

City of Paterson, SWOT Analysis

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Abstract

The City of Paterson, New Jersey (pop. 146,777) is at a pivotal point in its storied history (Quickfacts, 2010). The rise in the instance of fatalities as a result of structure fires and a disturbing trend in multiple fatality fires is commanding action. A true gap has been identified as a common factor in these fire events; no smoke detectors. The Fire Department of the City has many strengths that enable a coordinated aggressive approach toward educating the public of the need to have this protective measure in place. There are also numerous opportunities afforded to Paterson to assist in this implementation objective, such as a young vibrant staff of diverse race and culture. At the present time, however, the Department is weak in the area of public presence creating a disconnect between Fire personnel and city residents. Along with these weaknesses are threats that aggravate them. This strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis will break down these four areas and get to the bottom of the present situation with regard to the education for and installation of smoke detectors. The intent is to provide insight into the question for use in subsequent material: How can the City of Paterson Fire Department educate the public in the benefits of installing smoke detectors and facilitate the actual process of physical change?

Introduction

The City of Paterson Fire Department is the Local Enforcing Agency for Fire Prevention, Investigation and Education and has a budget of \$35,000,000.00 (Paterson, 2011). With this responsibility comes the duty to inform and enable the public to the benefits of public protective measures. In particular, smoke detectors. The majority of fire victims die or are injured from exposure to smoke and toxic gases, such as carbon monoxide, not actual burns. In addition, smoke obscures vision, decreasing your ability to escape. Last year there were 2,600 fire fatalities in the United States (USFA, 2012). The SWOT analysis performed below will outline what is currently in place and dissect the current features as it relates to smoke detectors. This analysis will be one mechanism for providing direction for the enlightening and empowerment of smoke detector public protective measures and avoid adding to these unacceptable national statistics.

Current Measures

The Fire Prevention Bureau, a Division of the Fire Department, is staffed by a Battalion Chief/Fire Official, one Captain, one Firefighter, thirteen Fire Inspectors and two clerks. The staff works 0800-1600 hours from Monday through Friday. The responsibilities run from periodic type inspections to complaint inspections. The abundance of annual inspections, dictate that a rapid pace is kept up by personnel.

Each day the Fire Inspectors are charged with performing smoke/CO detector inspections in, up to 8 resale and/or re-rental properties. On average, there is roughly one thousand of this type inspection per year. The goal is to identify properties with deficient systems and order their

correction through citations. Last year two hundred seventy five deficient systems were corrected. Ninety of these properties were cited as Imminent Hazard and ordered closed¹.

To some extent, line Fire Companies are also involved in the process of deficient smoke detection identification and mitigation. This process is limited to referrals to the Fire Prevention Bureau for taking corrective action. The Fire Companies also provide sporadic Public Education to school children when Firehouse visits are scheduled. Part of the information provided to the schoolchildren is smoke detector information and “Change your clock, change your smoke detector battery”. This, however, is not a common occurrence.

The Department receives 350 smoke detectors per year from “Operation 7 Save-a-Life”. There is no specific written program in place to effectively dispense these detectors throughout the community. The detectors are most often given out after receiving referrals from Company Officers and are given less often as part of community events.

Strengths

The Fire Department is well prepared and staffed to appropriately handle emergencies. No Company works with less than four personnel and sometimes you may find five or six personnel per apparatus. Training is consistent and the sheer volume of structure fires builds a very experienced firefighter.

At present time, the Department is very young and open to fresh ideas. The staff is the most racially diverse in the City’s history, 58% minority, creating a Department that statistically reflects the demographic of the City.² This greatly assists in working through language barriers

¹ Paterson Fire Department Official documents.

² Paterson Fire Department Official documents

and a better understanding of cultural sensitivities. With fifty plus nationalities calling Paterson home, this becomes extremely important.

Leadership is quickly becoming a great strength. The Fire Chief Michael Postorino has been forward thinking in his approach to the Department. His focus is now beginning to shift toward community involvement, including smoke detector education and dispensing.

Weaknesses

Improvement is needed in the area of community involvement. Resources have not been properly allocated to public education. At present time there is one Captain assigned to Public Education, and that is on a part time basis. The hundreds of smoke detectors that are given to the City annually should be more aggressively dispersed to those in need. The inefficient use of manpower is evident. On duty personnel are relegated to emergency response only, with very few exceptions. Although Paterson has excellent staffing of companies, that is the total focus of the budget. There are few other Divisions that are well staffed. Public Education has been almost all but forgotten. Therefore, there is no visibility of personnel in antiseptic conditions. Community involvement begins and ends at emergency scenes only. Perception is key. Without proper community involvement, the public perception of the Fire Department will likely be less than stellar.

Opportunities

Paterson is burgeoning with opportunity. As mentioned earlier, the diversity of the Department is a prime tool for utilization. Being able to linguistically and culturally relate your message to your community is a blessing. This is particularly true when the racial and ethnic makeup of a community is as diverse as Paterson's.

Using the free smoke detectors given by the state in combination with this diversity and heavy staffing is a great opportunity. On duty companies delivering the safety messages and giving out the free smoke detectors would be very effective.

Since there have been a number of multiple fatality fires in the recent past, it is a time where your message would be more justified in the minds of the public. This is a way to present the reality of failing to install or maintain smoke detectors. Sometimes a powerful message based on this reality is the only way to get the message out.

Threats

The greatest threat to a program of this nature in Paterson is economy. In 2011 Paterson laid off one hundred twenty five Police Officers. With Fire Department manpower at a twenty five year high in Paterson, the sights are very quickly turning toward them. In 2013, Paterson is facing a Thirty Million dollar structural deficit with dwindling aid packages. Already cuts are planned for attrition positions with the threat of layoffs looming. This is especially important to forward progress of special programs. Available manpower to be able to allocate with a need to remain ready for duty based on lower manpower may become reality.

Another threat is the exodus of building owners and increasing foreclosures. Many of the properties in or post foreclosures are left in disrepair. There is no one maintaining detectors and this happens so much that it is impossible to keep up with.

Conclusion

This analysis is meant to show what the Paterson Fire Department is currently doing to provide education and hardware as it pertains to smoke detectors. It has been demonstrated that the Department has a long way to go to have a real effect on the public trust and the proper allocation of personnel to accomplish this invaluable task. The Department has strong ties to the community and which should be utilized. Weaknesses have been identified, again focusing on community involvement. Focusing on this community involvement, there are great opportunities in front of the Department in waiting. A threat that could derail any near future involvement in smoke detector education is economy. If the Department can hold on to the proper staffing levels, then I believe much can be done.

References

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United States Fire Administration (2012). *Focus on Fire Safety: Smoke Alarms*. Retrieved from
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SWOT Analysis Worksheet

<p>Strengths What do you do well? What unique resources can you draw on? What do others see as your strengths?</p>	<p>Weaknesses What could you improve? Where do you have fewer resources than others? What are others likely to see as weaknesses?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Department is well prepared to respond to emergencies after the call is made. The staff is very well trained to perform aggressive search & rescue, suppression and life support. • A unique area to draw from is the Fire Prevention Bureau. They are constantly out inspecting properties and seeing the interior of dwellings as part of their duties. I would also draw from the housing officer to provide referrals for locations noted to have no or deficient smoke detectors. • Others see the Fire Department as a Jack of All Trades. In their eyes, any situation can be handled by the FD. The public will call for the most miniscule of issues or ones that are grand. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is necessary to improve upon the community involvement of the personnel. • The Paterson Fire Department fewer resources in public Education than others around them. There is only one Captain assigned on an as needed basis. • Others are likely to see the lack of visibility in the community and inability to relate to the public due to this lack of involvement.
<p>Opportunities What opportunities are open to you? What trends could you take advantage of? How can you turn strengths into opportunities?</p>	<p>Threats What threats could harm you? What is your competition doing? What threats do your weaknesses expose you to?</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities that are open to the FD are the free issuance of smoke detectors and a very racially diverse staff that could relate to the demographics. • The trend of multiple fatalities could help drive home the need for working smoke detectors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bad publicity toward the department creating distrust. • There is no competition. • Our weaknesses expose us to lack of trust and a disconnect in the community. • Poor economic conditions and lack of owner occupied dwellings.