

In My Opinion...

Dean Says:



Charlene Kidder

What's Fair is Fair?

In the commerce of fire protection, cooperation represents the hallmark of success. No one can plow his or her way through the jungle of fire protection problems, hoping to find meaningful solutions, without working cooperatively with others.

Just the other day, I received an e-mail message from the chief fire protection officer at a private college. The e-mail explained a dilemma that the college had to face. The local fire marshal had complained that the college did not always request fire department response when they received an alarm from an in-room smoke alarm in a dormitory.

The particular case in point involved an event where the public safety office of the college received an alarm from an in-room smoke alarm. Almost immediately, the public safety office dispatcher received a telephone call from the occupant of that room reporting that she had generated some smoke accidentally while using her hair dryer. She asserted that no fire condition existed.

The dispatcher knew from the caller ID unit on his console that the caller

was, indeed, calling from the room in question. He also immediately dispatched a public safety officer to respond to that room and verify the actual conditions. The officer arrived at the room location within two minutes of the dispatch. As the occupant had reported, the officer found very light smoke conditions, localized in the vicinity of a hair dryer. The officer opened the dorm room window to help remove the smoke and then proceeded to reset the fire alarm system control unit that had transmitted the signal from the in-room smoke alarm to the public safety office.

Following the requirements of the local Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ), as the college understood them, the dispatcher in the public safety office sent a report of the incident by TeleFax to the public fire department dispatch center.

Now you must understand some other facts regarding this incident. The dormitory in question has full protection by a wet pipe automatic sprinkler system. In addition to the in-room smoke alarms, the building has system smoke detectors installed in the corridors and in all public areas of the dorm. The physical layout of this college campus places every dormitory in a location that allows on-duty public safety officers to reach any room within two minutes.

The following day, the fire marshal paid a visit to the public safety office of the college. He delivered a Notice of Violation that declared the college in

violation of a requirement that the public fire department must receive immediate notification to respond to all incidents on the college campus.

While there is no question that campus fire safety looms as a major issue at colleges throughout the United States, it is my judgment that this college has taken every reasonable step to provide an excellent level of protection for its students, faculty, and staff.

As I inquired further as to what might motivate the fire marshal to require a fire department response to every incident, no matter how trivial, I learned that the fire department charges the college \$250 for each call they receive from 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. and \$650 for each call they receive from 10:01 p.m. to 6:59 a.m. The fire department levies this charge whether they respond to the call or not!

Ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous! The fire department has decided to make the college a "cash cow." The result: the college already sees itself in an adversarial relationship with the Authority Having Jurisdiction. Instead of a spirit of cooperation, the AHJ has placed the municipality in a position of great tension.

Doesn't the AHJ understand that the government exists to serve the people who live in that jurisdiction? Doesn't the AHJ understand that he already has an organization, the college, that has devoted itself—at significant expense—to provide a high level of fire protection for its students, faculty, and staff?

For thirty years, I worked as a private AHJ for a major Highly Protected Risk (HPR) insurance company. I would never have treated our clients with such disdain. And, neither should this AHJ, or any AHJ.

So, as an AHJ, the next time you decide on some strategy to bring a higher level of protection to your jurisdiction, think about the ramifications of your attitude. Do you approach your customers as adversaries? Or, do you approach each situation with an attitude of cooperation?

I strongly urge you to choose to use "cooperation" as your primary tactic. □

The Moore-Wilson SIGNALING REPORT

**Volume 11, No. 6
Page 14**

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