

# **Youth Firesetting an International Concern**

## *NASFM's Conference a Great Opportunity*

By

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Youth firesetting is a universal problem, this was never more evident than it was on January 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>, 2003 in Greenbelt Maryland, when the National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM) office in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Justice - Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), hosted an International Conference on Juvenile Firesetting and Intervention Programs.

For the past four years NASFM has been dedicated to addressing youth firesetting behavior and its affects on communities across the nation. Some of the ways they have done this is by conducting a comprehensive research project. The purpose of conducting these studies was to formulate the basis of a strategic plan to better coordinate existing public and private resources needed to reduce the severity and incidence of fires started by children. This publication is available on their website at [www.firemarshals.org](http://www.firemarshals.org) They have also provided valuable and innovative opportunities for experienced people and willing learners to come together to explore more comprehensive and “best practices” approaches to this deadly and devastating issue. And then they took it a step farther by exploring the issue at an international level.

At the end of January, I had the privilege of attending the two-day event along with many dedicated colleagues. Each state in the U.S. was invited to attend and many took advantage of the opportunity. The presenters, which consisted of a prestigious group of intervention team members, came all the way from England, Scotland, Sweden, New Zealand, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom to share what they have learned about youth-set fires and their strategies to reduce them.

The networking that came from this event was phenomenal. Each day we gathered to listen, learn, share ideas, find solutions, and identify valuable resources we could carry home to enhance our own efforts. One of the most interesting, yet not surprising facts learned, was that this behavior is universal despite cultural differences. What was unique were the many different approaches and venues that are being used to address it.

All of the presenter's program materials and contact information will be made available on the NASFM web site. What follows is an overview of the event and the attendees who made it possible.

### **DAY ONE**



Frank McGarry

The program opened with a welcome by the president of NASFM; Donald P. Bliss - New Hampshire's Fire Marshal; William Barnard - Maryland's State Fire Marshal; and NASFM's Project Manager - Frank McGarry. We learned about NASFM's focus, which centers on research, education and engineering

solutions. It was interesting to hear about the work they have been doing on developing and implementation of a juvenile firesetting database, a very necessary piece for any program. The ability to gather nationwide data on youth set fires will help in offering a better picture of the issue itself, and the children that are involved. Time was spent discussing some of the engineering solutions being designed to help reduce fire spread, particularly in school settings. There was clear evidence provided that demonstrated the value in designing fire resistive materials that will help slow the spread of fire and reduce the amount of damage that occurs.

A partnership with the University of Maryland was formed to conduct a “safe lighter project.” Research Director Andre Marshal and graduate student Justin Williamson provided information about the work they are doing to design a lighter that burns at a lower temperature and has no visible flame, yet still meets the needs of the consumer. The ultimate goal of the project is to reduce the ignition height or the level that items will ignite. While the processes is painstaking and requires intense testing, research, and work, the end product could be advantageous and assist in reducing the number of youth set-fires with lighters.

As each of the international speakers started their presentations they were sensitive to the audience and provided a brief geography lesson, which we all appreciated. They also shared some of the demographics of the areas they represented and a good understanding of how their fire service or agency was structured. Many of the terms they used to explain their programs and departments were very different from those commonly heard in the U.S., however, the definitions weren’t far off at all. An example would be in the U.S. we say “fulltime or career firefighters” they say “whole time” firefighters”, another example would be U.S. says “volunteer firefighter” and they refer to them as “retained firefighters”. The one I liked the best however, was the term used in most of the presentations for firesetting or fire-play. Here in the U.S. there have been many discussions on what is the most appropriate term to apply to firesetting behavior. I believe that our colleagues from the other side of the Atlantic have defined it best; they simply refer to this behavior as “fire-lighting”. This definition removes the labeling concern we have had, doesn’t place blame, yet doesn’t downplay the seriousness of the incident in any way. I’ll be interested to hear what others think about adopting this term and whether we will begin to use it here in United State.



Our first international speaker was Bob Bertram, “Commander - Community Safety” from Edinburgh, Scotland. Bob was dressed in the official Scottish attire and spoke with a wonderful methodical brogue. He opened by offering everyone “*a hundred thousand welcomes*” and expressed his sincerity for the opportunity to share and learn from everyone that was present. Bob talked about the “fire brigades” in Scotland as well as their fire problem. He reported that 70% of their fires are deliberately set, or what they refer to as “willful fires”. Their juvenile firesetting program primarily utilizes firefighters as “advisors” (interventionists). These people are trained and follow a list of “good practice

guidelines” when providing the service. This helps to maintain a consistent approach with every child. The majority of their referrals come from parents, and many of the children they see are between the ages of 4 and 6. There are an average number of 50 children referred into the program each year. Bob shared some things they are looking to improve on as well. They are working towards finding a better means of collecting and compiling data, their current system is inaccurate and doesn’t provide the “picture” they need to best address the issue.

Chief Barry Hamilton, Executive Director - Community Safety and Merveen Cross - Community Safety Officer presented JAFFA (Juvenile and Family Fire Awareness) a well-recognized juvenile intervention program being offered in Western Australia. They mentioned that they are currently in the evaluation phase of their program and are hoping to identify items that work well and those that may need adjusting through this process. They were appreciative of this opportunity to come to America to see and compare as well as learn what they can to improve their efforts. A unique factor in JAFFA is that all children are referred to a sole source mental health facility. These services are paid for with program funds, making them easily assessable to every child in need. The “aim” or goal of their program is to “*minimize the loss of life and injury, property and environment damage caused by juveniles lighting fires*”. Their program is open to children ages 4 through 16 and focuses on finding out the reasons for a child’s involvement with fire. Their statistics show that 96% of their referrals are males and that they come from single-family homes. They always do their assessments in the child’s home and provide a high level of education to both the child and the parents.



One powerful message they try to impress on the child is that “fire destroys; it’s your life, your responsibility and your choice.” Children are categorized using a child behavior checklist and a youth self report. The process places them in one these categories; “once off firefighters” (first time involvement with fire), “curious firefighters” “problematic” and “children afraid of fire”. Strategies are then used to intervene and are often customized to meet the child and family’s needs. An extensive follow-up process is used to help evaluate the program.



Yvonne Terjestam & Linda Smedberg

Two presenters, Linda Smedberg, Project Manager – Swedish Fire & Rescue Services Agency and Yvonne Terjestam, Professor University of Lund, Sweden provided an informative overview of their involvement in this issue. Acting as a supervisory government authority for the fire and rescue services they strive to promote practices that improve accident prevention and responses to fire. Overall they are working to create a “safety culture” in their communities. They have done research to support

their efforts and it is available on their website [www.srv.se](http://www.srv.se), be sure to click on the English version. Their work strives to evaluate what parents know and also looks to see what impacts self-image can have on youth and their behavior.



Alan Rhodes, Manager Community Development from the state of Victoria, located on the east coast of Australia provided an overview of Australian intervention activities. Their program is open to children ages 3 through 16. The majority of their referrals come from parents and the court system. They provide an assessment by trained firefighters. A multi-level approach provides the opportunity to address youth development, they also teach children about firefighters and the job of firefighting, empowering and helping them to develop fire safety skills of their own. They work hard to provide education in the schools that will have a preventive effect on the issue of fire lighting as well. They recognize that education alone won't completely address this serious issue and that it isn't appropriate for everyone that comes into the program. They work to address the causal factors that often motivate the behavior by incorporating a wide range of efforts that address specific issues in the child's life, and also works within their intellectual abilities.



Chief John Judd, Assistant Chief, Manchester (England) Fire Brigade spoke about the prevention efforts being made to address youth related crimes in their community. Arson and youth involved in arson are areas where they are currently focused. In 1994 the Youth Justice Trust was established. Its role was to act as a catalyst in bringing agencies together to tackle youth crime. Ten local authorities and partner agencies of Greater Manchester have a tradition of working together and have recognized the real benefits of sharing resources, vision and good practice. This approach has been successful because it provides clear information about young people and crime, looks at new ways of addressing these issues, it helps facilitate an understanding of how agencies can work together and provide the means for this to happen. One of the fun, innovative ideas that were created to enhance their education programs with school age children was the creation of a safety mascot. They created a character named "Welephant" who has evolved since his inception to stay current and remain popular with school age children. This wise elephant is featured in workbooks along with his co-worker "Ellie." Together they help kids learn how to be fire safe.

## **DAY TWO**



Chief Ray Coleman, Community & Youth Liaison Officer from Auckland, New Zealand shared the information on their program, which is called FAIP (Fire Awareness Intervention Program). Ray discussed how New Zealand is broken up into 8 regions with a population of around 3.9 million people. The program works to help not only the children, but also the parents to overcome the problems of child fire lighting. Firefighters in uniform deliver the program and they are compensated for their time. Collectively they

see approximately 900 to 1000 children each year. They don't limit their program to any particular age group and will see anyone with fire related behavior problems. Their referrals come from many places: social welfare agencies; police; schools; parents; and the court system. As part of the training provided to their program partners, they provide the opportunity for the health professionals to go to an actual fire scene and learn first hand about the realities of fire and just what firefighters experience. They have a process for the intervention and they follow it closely each time to insure consistency. One very important part of the process is having the parent sign a consent form. This form is used to show that they were invited into the home and to also insure that the parent knows they are required to report any abuse issues for which they become aware. The intervention is delivered over several visits to the home and includes fire safety education. Timeliness is very important in this process. An interventionist strives to make contact with the family within 3 days after receiving the referral and conduct the intervention within 10 days. Ray is a great inspiration and has dedicated many hours to this program as well as being a wonderful resource for others.

Chief John Burke, Director Support Services for Cleveland (UK) Fire Brigade provided an interesting presentation on the prevention efforts being made in his area to reduce the number of fires involving juveniles. Some of these prevention efforts include, working with a variety of agencies to remove abandoned vehicles more quickly, cleaning up neighborhoods, putting gates at the end of alley's and providing better locations for garbage and rubbish containers to be kept. All of these efforts are made in order to remove the temptation and easy access juveniles often target for fire activity. They are looking closely at other agencies and services being provided that might overlap or offer assistance in any of these areas.



Prevention is very important and is included in the training programs for all firefighters. Their training standards include requirements making it every firefighters responsibility *“to inform and educate your community and to improve awareness of safety matters.”* Chief Burke offered some insightful information they have uncovered regarding arson and arsonists. Their research shows the most arsonists (83%) travel less than 750 meters to light their fires, 94% of arson fires occurred in disadvantaged areas, and a large number of their arson fires are started by juveniles out to vandalize areas in the community. This research has prompted them to increase the training to fire investigators and to also continue the fire safety education provided at the elementary school level. They believe that *“if they can get in early, they can reduce the number of arson fires in the UK.”*



Dr. Sherri Mackay, Program Director for the TAPP-C program in Ontario, Canada provided an inspiring and enlightening presentation about her work in the area of youth firesetting. She was asked to work to develop and disseminate an assessment and intervention program for juvenile firesetters in Ontario. Her work is supported and encouraged by the fire service throughout Toronto and Ontario. She

shared a quote from the Fire Marshal for Ontario that reads *“Imagine a world where no one is hurt by fire.”* This type of support, coupled with the FPP Act that mandates fire prevention and education be provided, has been the catalyst behind her work. The requirements that were established for the program were very complete. They need to include such things as service, research, education, be evidence based, build linkage between relevant agencies, foster collaboration between the fire service and mental health, build on professional strengths, create a sustainable provincial resource and provide continuous quality improvement. It is no wonder they are finding the successes they are with these types of guidelines to direct their work.

All children who have mis-used fire receive an assessment by a mental health professional and fire safety education from fire service personnel. Dr. Mackay feels that the relationships between all of the participating agencies are the key to keeping programs going. Throughout the program they do all they can to look at the child and family characteristics as well as the fire incident itself. Armed with all of this information they can evaluate the risk this child is at with firesetting. They conclude that firesetting has a developmental course just as any other behavior, so it is imperative to look at the child in interaction within their environment over time. Their program and the work that surrounds it is thorough and complete and deserves a serious look from anyone who is looking to start a program or improve on an existing one.



Rob Taylor, Commander of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade in Melbourne, Australia acts as the Community Education Coordinator and is actively involved with their juvenile firesetting program. They take a proactive approach to fire safety and start early with new parent education programs that include burn and fire awareness. They also have a two-part program for school age children that are well received by most schools. Their juvenile firesetting program has been operating since 1986 and has evolved over the years through hard work and research. Their “practioners”

(interventionists) are trained firefighters who provide the program to the children referred into the program. Most referrals come from parents or the justice system. They have a state coordinator who oversees the needs of the program and helps to facilitate the activities. They work closely with other agencies and clinical psychologists to provide services to at-risk youth. One of the creative partnerships they have developed to maintain communication between program partners is through a local car dealerships that have video conferencing capabilities. These partners provide the opportunity to communicate through the newest technology keeping the lines of communication open to program partners when necessary. They have also created some fire safety educational games that are available in Compact Disc format and have been received positively by schools in their community.



Deborah Brown - Community Safety Officer and Kevin Hepple - Divisional Officer for the Tyne & Wear Metropolitan Fire Brigade in England provided an informative and motivating presentation on their

Fire Service Community Plan. It is preventive in nature and works collectively with multiple phases to address the issue of youth set fires. They begin with a fire safety education in the local schools. These lessons are integrated into the school curriculum through a mandatory citizenship requirement. They include lessons on fire education, fire safety and fire competence. Their focus is currently on children in grades 1, 6, and 8. Realizing that addressing the issue of juvenile firesetting can put a drain on the resources a fire department has, they feel it is vital to provide fire safety education early and continuously to honestly make a difference. For children involved in a fire-lighting situation there are age appropriate programs that include visits to the home by teams of trained interventionists. These teams provide education for the child and parents. They also tailor programs specifically to fit individual needs of those referred by the justice system.

They also offer a program called the “Young Firefighters Association,” which offers the opportunity for at-risk youth to learn skills and techniques used by firefighters. This is an intense, 4 year long program that teaches team building and respect and works to improve self-esteem. Children that complete this program walk away with a portfolio of certificates and develop good social skills along the way. This program is provided by a group of trained volunteers and is wonderful opportunity for the “at-risk” children in their community.

This was indeed a unique and wonderful opportunity to make our world a little bit smaller, comparing our efforts around the globe. Many thanks to NASFM for making it a reality.

# International Participants

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