



Chicago's Turn

On Oct. 17, 2003, a fire in a Chicago high-rise office building claimed six lives. The incident turned tragic after vehicles left the scene, only for ambulances to be dispatched 90 minutes later to retrieve victims trapped in the stairwell of the building. Most fire scenes are chaotic, but like a stack of dominoes, one blunder after another resulted in six fatalities and the Chicago Fire Department under a microscope.

The morning after the fire, I participated in a meeting with about 100 fire chiefs and chief officers in Washington. The news of the Chicago fire dominated the morning coffee break. A small circle of chiefs somberly concurred that "something went wrong" with CFD's incident command and predicted "big-time" repercussions. They were right. A few weeks after the fire, e-mails listed a multitude of problems, and CFD officers would roll their eyes whenever the incident was brought up. The city formed a commission to investigate, and its report was released this week. The panel's recommendations include items you've all heard and read before:

- Require sprinklers in all commercial high-rise buildings
- Firefighters should conduct top-to-bottom searches of all high-rise stairwells during a fire, not after;
- Air-supply systems should be increased from 30 minutes to 45-60 minutes;
- Chief officers should have drivers or aides during large-scale incidents;
- Annual physical fitness testing should be mandatory;
- Officer promotions should be based on competitive exams; and
- All radio channels—including commanders' channels -- should be recorded.

Did the Chicago Fire Department really need an outside commission to tell them the above information? Sprinklers and annual fitness testing? Come on. CFD has come a long way from 10 years ago, and it has further to go. Any department can change overnight with the right

management and a blank check, but not when politics and the culture of the department weigh it down. Money alone doesn't make it right; it's people who make or break a department. After the fire, Gov. Rod Blagojevich also ordered an investigation by James Lee Witt, former director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It will be interesting to see the results produced by Witt's team of experts—non-Chicagoans with emergency service expertise -- AND if their recommendations will be implemented. What happened in Chicago could happen in a lot more departments across the country. It was just Chicago's turn this time.

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