**SPARKS FIRE DEPARTMENT**



ICMA Program Excellence Award

Robert King, Division Chief/Fire Marshal

1605 Victorian Avenue

Sparks, Nevada 89431

775-353-2261 Office

775-353-2396 Fax

bking@cityofsparks.us

**Community Profile/Problem Assessment:** Located 4,410 feet above sea level, the City of Sparks is home to over 91,600 residents within 38 square miles. Since 1905, Sparks has been a family-oriented community providing various activities throughout the year. During the past decade, Sparks has seen its population increase by 75%. Data analysis indicates that the City of Sparks has a high percentage of older homes with non-working or non-existent smoke alarms. At least 45% of the population within the City is high risk – children under 18 and adults over 65. The Sparks Fire Department serves the City population plus extensive mutual and automatic aid areas with a compliment of a Fire Chief, 4 Division Chiefs, 3 Battalion Chiefs, 2 Training Captains, 73 Firefighters, 6 Fire Inspectors, and 3 Administrative staff.

**Introduction:** Project SAFE (Survive A Fire Emergency) is a Residential Smoke Alarm Education and Installation Program for older homes within the City of Sparks. The Program provides the most at-risk City residents with door-to-door installation of 10-year smoke alarms, a fire/life safety assessment, and educational fire/life safety information. Data analysis and door-to-door surveys identified the target audience. The target audience included 250 homes in the lowest income portion of Sparks. A 2009 survey of 12% of the homes in the target area revealed: 71% percent do not have working smoke alarms; half of existing smoke alarms needed replacement due to age (over 10 years old per NFPA); 94% percent do not have smoke alarms in each sleeping area; nearly 9 out of 10 do not practice escape plans, an established meeting place, or test their smoke alarms; only 1 in 4 have a smoke alarm on each level of the home; and 40% have experienced a fire. These residential locations had the highest number of fire-related calls and were all constructed prior to 1993, before interconnected smoke alarms were mandated by National Building Codes to be located in bedrooms and hallways.

**History:** In 2006, the City of Sparks experienced a traumatic residential fire that resulted in the fatality of two teenage sisters. The fire occurred at night in the living room of an older two-story home, while the family was sleeping. The sisters were rescued from their second-floor bedrooms, but later passed away at the hospital from extensive smoke inhalation. A comprehensive fire investigation revealed that the home did not have any life-saving smoke alarms installed on either level. It was this eye-opening experience that hit home to everyone in our community, and led to the current innovation of the Project SAFE Residential Smoke Alarm Program. Division Chief/Fire Marshal Robert King spearheaded the implementation of a Residential Smoke Alarm Education & Installation Program for the community.

**Program Implementation:** The Project SAFE Residential Smoke Alarm Program was implemented in two phases: “***Community Awareness and Education****”* from 2007 – 2009, designed to educate the citizens in our community about the life-saving aspects of smoke alarms in the home, and ***“Installation and Education”*** from 2010 – 2011, designed to install free 10-year battery operated smoke alarms in every sleeping room and centrally located in hallways of homes built prior to 1994, conduct a personalized fire-safety inspection of the home, and supply residents with fire safety educational literature. The goal of both phases was to implement a community awareness, education, and installation program in the City of Sparks that would make a measurable difference in reducing deaths and injuries in a fire.

**Phase One – Community Awareness and Education:** The purpose of this phase is to educate City of Sparks citizens about the importance of working smoke alarms in the home, new smoke alarm technology, fire escape planning, and fire reporting procedures. This phase was funded with city budgeted funds, proceeds from a Fire Department Open House/Pancake Breakfast, and donations from local businesses.

During this phase, many innovative ideas were implemented for the educational campaign:

* Created a program name and designed a logo – Project SAFE (Survive A Fire Emergency).
* Developed a new temporary position to assist with the marketing and organization of the program, then advertised and hired a local University of Nevada (UNR) student studying journalism.
* Designed and developed a professionally made 3-minute Project SAFE educational Smoke Alarm DVD discussing smoke alarms in the home and showing a Sparks family conducting a home evacuation drill. The Sparks family donated their time, and the local government television station donated employees for filming. A local business donated the time to reproduce 500 copies of the Project SAFE Smoke Alarm DVD.
* Updated the City Fire Department Website with smoke alarm information and video.
* Gave numerous presentations to social groups, businesses, Chamber of Commerce, and local television and radio shows.
* Wrote and submitted many Project SAFE news articles for the local newspapers.
* Organized a Fire Department Open House/Pancake Breakfast to market the Project SAFE program and educate citizens about smoke alarms and fire department operations.

**Phase Two – Installation and Education:** The purpose of this phase is two-fold: (1) to get citizens to install new 10-year lithium battery operated smoke alarms in every sleeping room and hallway of homes built before 1994, (2) to get citizens to install new 110 volt 10-year lithium battery back-up smoke alarms in every sleeping room and hallway of homes built after 1994 having smoke alarms over 10 years old. This phase was funded with a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant in the amount of $32,592.00 in March 2010, and the 1st Annual Project SAFE Golf Tournament Fundraiser in June 2010 which raised $8,000.

During this phase, many more innovative ideas were implemented for the installation campaign:

* Wrote and successfully obtained a FEMA grant.
* Organized a successful Project SAFE Golf Tournament Fundraiser.
* Developed English and Spanish educational literature on smoke alarms and escape plans.
* Conducted a Community Risk Survey in the target area in 2009.
* Mobilized teams of business and individual volunteers to help install smoke alarms.
* Developed Home-Safety Checklists for the residents.

The specific goal of this phase was for installation teams to visit 250 single-family homes to:

* Install 10-year smoke alarms with 9 volt lithium batteries in each sleeping area, hallway, and on each level of the home.
* Install strobe and bed shaker smoke alarm kits for the hearing impaired.
* Replace traditional batteries with 10-year lithium batteries in all existing smoke alarms.
* Increase citizen awareness by conducting a home fire safety check and providing fire prevention educational information, tools, and resources.
* Evaluate improvements in home fire safety within participating neighborhoods.

Eight to ten teams installed alarms and educated residents on three different Saturdays between November 2010 and January 2011, honoring appointments and knocking on doors in high-fire risk areas to offer the service. Installation teams consisted of a fire department fire safety educator, smoke alarm installer, assistant, and Spanish-speaking translator, if needed. Installers, assistants, and translators volunteered their time as individuals or from their perspective businesses. Within the same time period, teams of two on-duty Sparks Fire Inspectors installed alarms in 60 homes for residents not available on Saturdays.

**Program Results and Community Impact:** The Project SAFE Residential Smoke Alarm Program is very successful. The initial goal of the FEMA grant was to install at least 750 new 10-year smoke alarms in 250 target area homes. The Project SAFE program exceeded that goal by installing 921 smoke alarms with 10-year lithium batteries in 345 homes. The program also placed 120 10-year lithium batteries into existing smoke alarms that were under two years old, and installed nine smoke alarm kits for the hearing impaired with strobe and bed-shaker devices.

Eighty percent of all homes visited had a smoke alarm, but only six out of every ten homes had an alarm that worked. Sixty two percent of the homes with at least one working smoke alarm needed replacements because theirs were over 10 years old. Over eighty three percent of the homes with working smoke alarms needed more alarms in place because they did not have them in all sleeping rooms, hallways, and on each level of the home.

**Lessons Learned:** Sparks Fire Department has learned that publicity via door hangers, media, word-of-mouth, schools, and community-service organizations is most effective. Because only a small portion of people who need the alarms call to register for an appointment, door knocking is very successful in areas identified as high risk. Many residents state, “Oh, yes we need alarms. I just forgot to call or lost the information.” On every single evaluation, residents rated each service component outstanding. A handful of appreciative comments include:

* *“They knocked on my door. What a wonderful program. Now I feel safe and protected. Thank you.”*
* *“This is absolutely the best program the fire department has done for members of this community.”*
* *This project will save many lives. It will help low-income seniors live safe.”*

To ensure ongoing success with Project SAFE, Sparks Fire Department will continue fundraising efforts through the 2nd Annual 2011 Project SAFE Golf Tournament/Fundraiser, the 22nd Annual Project SAFE Fire Department Open House/Pancake Breakfast, and through request for grant funding.