

FireRescue1 News

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Milwaukee programs focus on fatalities

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MFD director of community relations

From January 1987 to May 1991, the City of Milwaukee experienced 106 fire-related deaths. Out of these, 63 were children under 18 and 59 happened in an identifiable area of the city. Most shockingly, 91 of the victims were killed in homes with no smoke detector, a disconnected smoke detector, or detectors without batteries.

The City of Milwaukee Mayor's office and the Milwaukee Fire Department collaborated to develop Project FOCUS (Firefighters out Creating Urban Safety) in 1991. FOCUS was created as a fire prevention program that would have an immediate impact on fire deaths in the city. The project was created to target areas of the city that experienced a high number of structural fires and/or fire-related deaths over the previous two years.

Different neighborhoods

Project FOCUS sees on-duty firefighters target a neighborhood and conduct a door-to-door campaign intended to educate residents on fire safety and prevention. It is done every year in spring and fall for three weeks. During those three weeks, firefighters break into two-person teams and visit every home in a targeted neighborhood to test or install smoke detectors, and/or replace batteries all at no cost. We have funded the scheme through private corporations and state grants.



Photo Milwaukee Fire Department
A Milwaukee firefighter guides a youngster through the "Survive Alive House."

Firefighters who participate in FOCUS work one of two shifts — 9-11 a.m. or 1-3 p.m. — and meet at a prearranged firehouse in the target area to receive addresses before visiting homes. On each shift, four companies execute FOCUS and are expected to visit at least 64 homes. Over the course of the year, all engine and truck companies in the city participate.

Since the scheme was implemented, fire-related deaths have decreased year after year and more than 20,000 smoke detectors have been installed in residences.

Focus on children

The statistics showing that 63 children had died in fires within four years made us realize specific focus was needed on this area. As result, we created the Survive Alive Program and the Milwaukee Fire Education Center's Survive Alive House.

The Survive Alive Program started in 1992 and consists of a three-component curriculum. The curriculum includes children receiving classroom

instruction on fire safety from their teachers, and then visiting the Survive Alive House for a 90-minute instruction given by Milwaukee firefighters on how to escape a fire. Lastly, the students are given supplemental materials to reinforce what they learned in the program.

Since its inception, more than 280,000 youngsters have successfully completed the Survive Alive Program, and each year more than 13,000 Milwaukee children visit the Survive Alive House. The House is designed to teach second and fifth grade students fire safety and prevention techniques.

At the Survive Alive House, students receive hands-on practical training, too. In the House, a group of students enter a replica of a child's bedroom and pretend they are sleeping. While they are asleep, the room fills with smoke and the smoke detector sounds. The children are instructed to roll out of bed, crawl across the floor to a door, and use the back of their hand to check the temperature of that door. If the door is warm or if they see smoke when peeking out the door, they must exit via an alternate route. Once all the children have escaped the home and arrived at their meeting place, one student is instructed to call 911.

As a result of the many children's lives we have touched through the Survive Alive Program, Milwaukee has not had a child fire fatality so far this year or in 2007 — a goal that hasn't been achieved in 25 years.

[Back to previous page](#)

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