

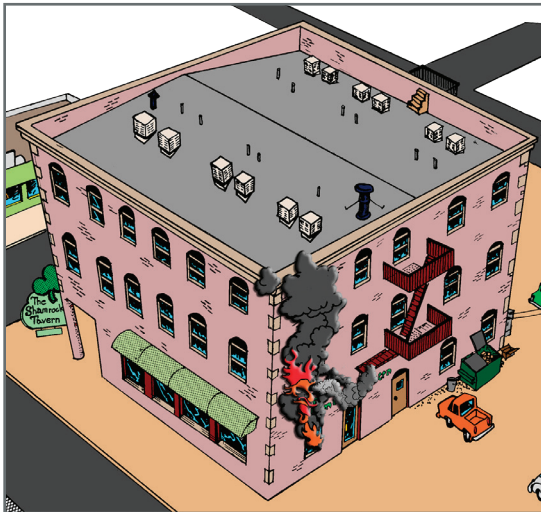
Managing Life Safety for Structural Firefighting Operations

The Hierarchy of Life Safety : A three-layer approach to protecting the community from the threat of fire.

BY NICK BRUNACINI

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The fire department is responsible for providing life safety against the threat of fire for the entire community. Protecting the community from fire requires a multi-layered approach. This begins with public education and prevention, followed by proper building design (through fire/building codes) and fire protection systems. The last elements in providing life safety against fire are manual fire suppression and traditional search and rescue methods. What follows is the Hierarchy of Life Safety for Structure Fires, listed in order of effectiveness in protecting life. .



What is the quickest way to restore life safety for a fire on the first floor of this three-story building?

- Fast, aggressive search starting on the 1st floor, then the 2nd and 3rd floors.
- Fast, aggressive search starting on the 2nd floor based on rescuing the most endangered.
- Fast, aggressive search on the 3rd floor based on rescuing the largest group.
- Attack and extinguish the fire.

The answer is D. Based on the fire's size, extent and location, eliminating the fire is the precursor to restoring public safety. Expect "fire under control" well ahead of the "all clear."

No. 1—Preventing fires: The most effective way to safeguard the community against fire is to prevent them from happening in the first place. This requires good housekeeping, maintenance, and fire safety practices. Public education plays a major role in teaching fire-safety behaviors that prevent unwanted fire. These include maintaining exit corridors, properly storing combustibles, keeping utilities (gas and electric) in proper working order, and properly storing and disposing of flammables. An ounce of prevention provides the most robust defense against fire. The pound of cure is often too little and too late. Educational campaigns like "Close before you doze" (sleep behind a closed door) place individuals in the safest circumstances in the event of a fire.

No. 2—Properly designed buildings, built-in fire-protection systems and alarms: The community lives and dies based on the fire code. Designing and constructing buildings to protect both the structure and what's

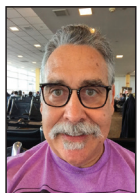
“Performing any other task ahead of fire control is akin to performing CPR on a victim being mauled by a bear. ”

inside (life and property) against fire provides the most effective life safety response in the event of a fire. Properly designed and maintained built-in fire sprinkler systems are the gold standard for protecting life and property in the event of a fire, which is why the fire code mandates them in occupancies with high life-safety requirements (hospitals, large apartment buildings, public assembly, etc.).

No. 3—Manual fire suppression and traditional fire department search and rescue methods: Today's structure fires burn faster, hotter and nastier than ever. An out-of-control fire in a building is an immediate threat to everyone and everything inside the structure. In many instances, the immediate exposures are also at risk. The fire department's most effective life-safety action at the scene of structure fires is extinguishing the fire.

As a general rule, the first action the fire department should take at the scene of a structure fire is to apply water to the fire as quickly as possible. It is the quickest, most direct way to reduce the hazards. This initial action has the greatest effect in protecting the entire community and any victims inside the building. In many instances, immediately attacking the fire will produce fire control in a few minutes, whereas skipping fire attack in favor of performing search and rescue can take three to four times longer while exposing firefighters to worsening fire conditions.

Society's best outcomes are achieved when fires are prevented. When prevention fails, the fire department restores life safety by eliminating the fire. Once the fire is being controlled, other life-safety tasks, such as search and rescue and ventilation, can take place. Performing any other task ahead of fire control is akin to performing CPR on a victim being mauled by a bear. It's not going to do much for the victim and will only piss off the bear. **BS**



Nick Brunacini joined the Phoenix Fire Department (PFD) in 1980. He served seven years as a firefighter on different engine companies before promoting to captain and working nine years on a ladder company. Nick served as a battalion chief for five years before promoting to shift commander in 2001. He then spent the following five years developing and teaching the Blue Card curriculum at the PFD's Command Training Center. His last assignment with the PFD was South Shift commander. Nick retired from the PFD in 2009 after spending the first 26 years of his fire-department career as a B-shifter and the last three on C Shift. Nick is the author of "B-Shifter—A Firefighter's Memoir." He also co-wrote "Command Safety." Today he is the publisher of the B Shifter Buckslip and a Blue Card instructor.