Fire Department Use of NFIRS

Goal: Opening presentation from Dr. Matt Hinds-Aldrich on how Atlanta Fire uses NFIRS Data. Discuss and share all things related to good data and D3M: Data-Driven Decision Making. To get quickly acquainted with D3M check out this article 10 Things You Always Wanted to Know About Data-Driven Decision Making: http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=423. While the article is targeted at school districts, the principles still apply.

Prompt questions:

- What do you always use NFIRS data to do?
- What decisions did you make based on NFIRS reports?
- How can NFIRS data help your fire department better succeed?
- What needs can NFIRS help you meet?
- How many divisions at your department have NFIRS data?
- How many people in your fire department know about NFIRS?
- Do you have a Standard Operating Procedure on NFIRS?
    - If so, what does it cover?
- How does the State program help fire departments?
- What programs rely on NFIRS data?
- What would help your fire department improve your data-driven decisions?

Dr. Matt Hinds-Aldrich from Atlanta Fire Department in Atlanta, GA provided a presentation on performance management in practice. Please review his PowerPoint slides to see the information presented. Main points include:

- Monthly roundtables where everyone presents an analysis with recommendations and impact. During these presentations, the FD became more aware of what the personnel were accomplishing. Issues with data were also brought to light when personnel were unable to account for disparities in performance
- Included maps of first due units responding outside of normal travel time which allows for analysis into why those units took longer to respond
- Establish key performance indicators and then follow up to see if they were being met. If not, why? What recommendations did personnel have to make them
- In an effort to increase data quality, it is important to watch out for and avoid fudging the numbers just to make everybody happy

To even get usable data, fire departments must combat the “make it green” mentality. In order to get through a report, personnel might click whatever boxes that will lessen the time it takes by using “Other codes” or making choices that simply get the report to validate. While this might seem great for the person entering the report, it hurts the department in the long run when they try to use the reports for data driven decisions.

Pulling the data out for a department to scrutinize can be labor intensive and requires some computer knowledge. When considering hiring a “tech” person to perform this task, it’s better to shoot for someone close to the Fire Service. Much time can be wasted if you have to translate the language and the needs to someone who has never been involved with a FD. The same is true when trying to find someone for GIS analysis/creation. SQL classes and automation can help with those problems.

Fire departments need to hear the message that:

- regardless of the mentality about reporting to higher entities, **the information collected is still valuable** and worth the time to collect, simply because it can help the FD
- NFIRS is an information system establishing standardized codes for all fire departments
- comparing fire departments would be impossible if each fire department created their own forms, codes, and terminology
- without a standard system, the terminology and quality could change from year to year based on administration and policy, making analysis inside a FD also impossible

- poor reporting now will bring severe headaches later
- ownership must be established and celebrated at the fire department level

Fire departments can use NFIRS data to show the needs for equipment instead of vaguely stating needs. “We need this equipment because of reasons” is not a successful tactic. The actual reasons, performance, and past analysis will go much further than hunches and vague statements.

One highly useful statistic that every fire department should compile is the “saved” property value. Collect pre-incident value and property loss to calculate saved property. Many times the amount of saved property is a shockingly high number. Be careful with this statistic that the FD is only using values for fire-related incidents. Some departments mistakenly enter value/damage for car accidents and HazMat incidents here. Perhaps these fields could be moved off the Basic module to the Fire module. It would be unnecessary to include them in the Wildland Fire module given that vegetation typically has no value unless harvested.

Departments also should make sure to utilize the “Buildings Threatened” field in the Wildland Fire module. This module can be used for any vegetation fire, regardless of size and often works better for grass fires or backyard fires. You can use this field to show structures that were undamaged simply because the fire department was there to mitigate the situation. The field would, however, be better served moved from the Wildland Fire module to the Basic module so it can be collected for all fires. Structures fires currently cannot collect this information, even though a structure fire might be very close to another structure and posing a direct threat.

Departments should consider creating a social media presence and clearly presenting data supporting the fire department. Many times the public has no idea what the actual call load looks like for a fire department. It can be very difficult to obtain equipment if your public doesn’t believe you need it. Citizens are usually positive about fire departments and you can increase that good will by sharing information about what the FD is doing, including pictures of training, sharing public service announcements about fire safety or some other PSA topic (learn CPR, check on the elderly in extreme heat, thaw your turkeys, etc). You can have a powerful voice in your community. Exercise it. Social media doesn’t have to be a time drain. Posts can be scheduled directly in a status update in Facebook and tools exist such as HootSuite (hootsuite.com) to help control multiple accounts. Post once to HootSuite and it will schedule and push the information to all your social media accounts.

After a particularly tragic event, take advantage of “the Blitz” and canvas the neighborhood offering your services. Recently, Kansas had a heating fire death in a house without smoke detectors. The local fire department spent the next week going door to door offering to install smoke detectors. Take advantage of the topic that your public is focusing on, instead of letting the opportunity for education and engagement pass.

Fire departments can use trending call volumes to schedule training. One fire department has had success with instituting a fitness program with SCBA several months before their historic “Structure Fire Season” and another makes sure to run drills on extrication right before peak vehicle accident times. Knowing the “seasons” in a fire department affords the opportunity to drill on up-to-date necessities, check equipment, and make sure everything is ready.

Knowing historical data also allows FDs to see a spike in a new trend. Without paying attention to current calls and historic it can be difficult to identify a problem quickly.

Consider making a map, even if it’s simple. Use one of the free mapping tools mentioned in the Resource & Tools Showcase. People love maps and always respond to them. They’ll instinctively check out where they live and the surrounding areas to see how they stack up. If a fire department does a great job on correctly entering addresses in reports, mapping can be a breeze.

Currently, there isn’t a solid network of sharing resources for FDs and NFIRS in general. This workshop was designed because of the missing piece. ***Information and resource sharing must be continued and grown.***