

# APARTMENT MANAGER PROGRAM SUMMARY

December 17, 2001, was a beautiful day, with the holiday season in full swing. Unfortunately, it was also the day that a three-alarm fire broke out at the Bonita Villa Apartments in Tigard, Oregon. By the time apartment occupants discovered the fire in a back bedroom, the situation threatened the lives of 55 adults and 43 children. A 24-year-old man died in the fire trying to locate a child who had already escaped with his mother. TVF&R fire officials later found a disabled smoke alarm in the bedroom closet.



Within days of the fire, firefighters canvassed the apartment complex and found 64% of the apartments with missing or non-functioning smoke alarms. Smoke alarms were immediately installed in these units.

Unbelievably--following a second fire one month later--firefighters found that over 50% of the alarms had already been disabled, mostly by the Spanish-speaking tenants!

Prior to the Bonita Villa fire, TVF&R believed that it was doing a good job with its smoke alarm education efforts. For decades, TVF&R had run a free residential smoke alarm program, conducted school presentations, and participated in safety fairs. Plus, it had pioneered the use of mass media to disseminate safety messages, including print advertising, radio and television public service announcements (PSAs) in English and Spanish, and mass transit signage. Following the deadly Oakwood Park Apartments fire in 1996 (eight fatalities), TVF&R also implemented "AFIRE" (Apartment Fire Incidence Reduction Education), in which firefighters and fire-prevention staff conducted weekend safety events at high-risk apartment communities.

Faced with another apartment fatal fire and tenants not understanding the importance of a smoke alarm, TVF&R Fire Chief Jeff Johnson knew it was time to get some answers.

TVF&R secured an \$85,000 U.S. Fire Administration grant in 2002 to help identify the barriers to maintaining working smoke alarms and improve strategies for targeting and educating at-risk populations (low-income English- and Spanish-speaking individuals).

## ***Phase 1: Demographic Study / Focus Groups***

The project's research phase encompassed both a demographic study and focus groups that included tenants from apartments where fatal fires had occurred. The research confirmed that individuals disable a smoke alarm due to a lack of understanding or insufficient awareness of its importance. While not new, this information prompted important insights into specific educational messages that would have an impact:

- Smoke alarms are designed to wake you if you have a fire at night.
- It's the silent smoke that kills.
- To react to a false alarm, fan the smoke and open a window—do not take out the alarm's battery!
- Smoke alarm maintenance is straightforward. All you have to do is change the battery.

The research also provided tips to help ensure that safety messages were better received and understood by Spanish-speaking audiences.

- Safety messages to the Latino community should explain the importance of smoke alarms in personal, as well as community, terms.
- Messages should be conveyed through pictures.

It is critical to repeat messages due to the transient nature of this demographic.

Finally, the study and focus groups revealed that the rate of disabling smoke alarms was highest at poorly managed properties (50%), while the rate of disabling them at better-managed properties was low (4%). This research proved that both the message and the messenger (landlord) were key to tenant safety.

# Apartment Manager Program Summary, continued

## Phase 2: Mass Media Campaign

Phase 2 consisted of a public awareness campaign using mass media such as public transit banners and radio and television PSAs. The campaign delivered the message, “Keep It Noisy! A working smoke alarm protects you, your family, and your neighbors,” in both English and Spanish, and all print pieces included pictorials.



**SLEEP SAFE:** Smoke alarms are made to wake you and your family in the night when most fire deaths happen.

## Phase 3: Apartment Manager Pilot Program

The final and pivotal phase of the project involved working with high-risk apartment complexes. Recognizing the crucial role that apartment managers play in creating safer apartments, TVF&R developed an apartment manager training and inspection program. It then identified 10 high-risk complexes to invite to join a pilot version of the program. Resources developed for the landlords included:

- Posters for laundry facilities and common areas
- Smoke alarm pictorial sheets to be given to tenants when signing the rental agreement
- Smoke alarm tabletop displays to educate new tenants about the device’s audible alarm and provide maintenance tips (changing the battery, “chirping,” etc.)
- Refrigerator magnets to reinforce the safety message for each apartment’s tenants

Additionally, three brochures were developed and mailed directly to the tenants in the 10 pilot complexes, which proved to be the most effective form of communicating the campaign’s message. The first confirmation came when—only weeks into the project—an apartment manager told TVF&R that six of her Latino tenants reported non-working smoke alarms after receiving a program brochure in the mail.

## Outcomes

Hundreds of landlords have participated in the Apartment Manager Training Program since TVF&R officially initiated it, and those numbers continue to grow. The program maintains regular contact with graduates through an electronic newsletter and periodic apartment complex inspections. In follow-up surveys, participants give the training very high marks and report changes in how they manage the safety of their apartment complexes. In a separate survey, tenants in participating complexes report better safety behavior by their apartment managers than respondents whose managers did not attend the training program. The incidence and severity of fires in multi-family buildings in the TVF&R response area has declined significantly since this program was instituted.

*This program received the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) Service Excellence Award in 2006. TVF&R staff members have hosted train-the-trainer sessions for Pacific Northwest fire service professionals and led sessions at the 2009 IAFC Fire Rescue International Conference.*