

WINGSPREAD III

STATEMENTS OF NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE TO

The FIRE PROBLEM in the UNITED STATES



A WINGSPREAD CONFERENCE REPORT
The Fire Service Institute, Iowa State University /
The Johnson Foundation

**WINGSPREAD III CONFERENCE
ON CONTEMPORARY FIRE SERVICE PROBLEMS
ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Statements of National Significance to
the Fire Problem in the United States**

Sponsored by
**Fire Service Institute
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa**
and
**The Johnson Foundation
Racine, Wisconsin**

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Responsibility For This Report

This document has been approved as a report of the conference attended by an Ad Hoc group which gathered at Wingspread in 1986. The individuals who are responsible for these statements are listed on the previous page. Institutions and associations are included for identification only; the institutions and associations do not necessarily share the opinions expressed, nor does The Johnson Foundation.

It was mutually agreed by all conference participants that the discussions be thoroughly objective in character and that the approach in each subject area be from the standpoint of the general welfare, and not from that of any special association or economic group. This integrity and dedication to a common purpose prevailed throughout the conference.

The participants would like to express its appreciation to Henry H. Halstead and the entire staff of the Johnson Foundation for their efficient and gracious support during our visit to Wingspread. Naturally, their support does not necessarily extend to an endorsement of the statements and observations made in this report.

These statements are offered as an aid to clearer understanding of the fire problem and the steps to be taken in bringing the national fire problem into sharp focus, with hope that careful consideration of the statements will contribute to the accomplishment of worthy objectives through improved fire service administration, education and research.

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Introduction

Wingspread III – 1986 is the third in the series of meetings known as the Wingspread Conference on Fire Service Administration, Education and Research. Wingspread I was held in 1966 and Wingspread II was held in 1976. All three conferences have been conducted with the support of the Johnson Foundation and held at Johnson's Wingspread conference facility in Racine, Wisconsin.

These conferences provide an opportunity for a small ad-hoc committee of fire service leaders to discuss contemporary and future issues facing the American fire service. Attendees participated on an individual basis and not as representatives of any organization to which they may be affiliated.

As with the previous Wingspread Conferences, Wingspread III tends to provide more questions than it does answers. That, of course, is the purpose of these Wingspread Conferences. We hope this report will help to focus on issues that must be faced.

It is encouraging to review the progress that has been made since the first Wingspread Conference in 1966. Two areas in particular stand out. First is the tremendous progress made in the education and professionalization of the fire service.

A second important advancement has been in technology. Automatic detection and suppression systems are now becoming the rule rather than the exception. Data indicates that these systems are having measurable results in saving lives.

Fire departments have expanded their role in the community through EMS, public education, hazardous materials control, etc. These are all positive signs of a new maturity among fire service leaders.

There is, however, an area where little progress has been made. We still do not fully understand how human behavior affects the fire problem. We tend to offer the explanation that Americans are complacent. Even if there is some truth to this allegation, it is clearly too simplistic an answer to a complex problem.

Part of the problem may rest with concern for our individual rights. Does this prevent us from better accepting responsibility to society as a whole? Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from the auto safety problem. Every evidence indicates that the incredible loss of life and injury caused by traffic accidents can be very substantially reduced by use of seat belts, reduced speed and eliminating drunken driving. If this is correct, why are we unable to implement this knowledge? Certainly no one can claim ignorance of these facts in a country which prides itself on its literacy and education.

Efforts to achieve fire safety have also been confronted with similar barriers. More than one fire chief attempting to obtain legislation for smoke detectors has heard the cry "my home is my castle," and no government can tell us what we must do inside our home. Is our problem one of people simply resisting being told what they must do because of our traditional American independence? We do not know.

Americans like to believe there are quick, simple answers to every problem. Fire safety is complex and cannot be solved by simply educating children, requiring smoke detectors or installing sprinkler systems. Each are necessary parts to the solution, but not the entire answer.

Wingspread III is an effort to encourage those responsible for the future fire safety to focus on the problem as a whole. If that purpose is achieved, then the conference will have served its purpose.

Conference Report Statements of National Significance

1. Society in general appears unwilling to take full advantage of the knowledge and technology which has proven effective in mitigating the fire problem.

In recent years, we have amassed considerable knowledge on how to create a more fire safe environment. Significant advances have also been made in the development of automatic detection and suppression systems making it possible to control the majority of fires in buildings before they become a threat to life. Unfortunately, this technology is not always understood or accepted.

Builders, developers and even some consumers complain about the additional expenses of installing life saving equipment. And many elected and appointed officials are too quick to bow to the vested interest. Certainly, these systems cost money, especially in retrofitting existing buildings. However, some of these costs can be offset by construction trade-offs and perhaps reduced insurance premiums. Regardless, if the public wants a more fire safe environment, they must demand full use of the technology proven to improve fire safety.

It may very well be that the key to a more fire safe environment rests with the public. Wingspread I pointed to public complacency as a major factor in the fire problem. There is ample evidence to indicate that we have not yet developed the public concern and commitment that is necessary to force public officials to provide a more fire safe environment. Also, as individuals, we appear unwilling to take personal responsibility by becoming strong advocates and practitioners for safety. Only when officials, elected and appointed, and the public accept that responsibility, will we be able to achieve a more fire safe environment.

2. Public fire safety education will not achieve its potential until it is organized in a systematic manner based on human behavior.

America is known for its high incidence of fires. Although it may be somewhat trite, it remains that a large number of these fires result from the behavior of men, women and children. The purpose of public education is to modify that behavior so that men, women and children are part of the solution rather than a contribution to the problem of unfriendly fires.

The last decade has seen a large increase in the number of programs devoted to what has become known as public fire safety education. Some individual programs have shown encouraging results. However, there are at least two problems that prevent public fire safety education from achieving its full potential.

A major deterrent to more effective public fire safety education is our lack of understanding how and why people contribute to the fire problem. Is it because Americans are complacent? Is it due to our environment? Or is it a continuation of complex factors we do not understand? These questions were raised 20 years ago at Wingspread I, but we have yet to find the answers.

A second lacking in public fire safety education is the tendency to focus on individual activities rather than develop a comprehensive program. There are good programs for school children and a variety of individual public awareness campaigns. However, these programs tend to be disconnected one from the other. There is a need to educate society as a whole in an

organized manner. As an example, it is of little value to educate people to install smoke detectors if we do not also educate them on how to maintain them. Legislation to mandate safety systems cannot be fully effective if our architects and engineers are not educated on their importance and use.

Every segment of our society, including the fire service, must be included in an integrated system of fire safety education.

Public education appears to offer considerable promise in helping achieve a higher degree of fire safety. However, if fire safety educators are to fulfill their objective of modifying human behavior toward more safe practices, then they first must understand that behavior. The complexity of this problem will require a multidisciplinary approach.

A better understanding of human behavior should lead to a more systematic fire safety education effort. Then, and only then, will we be on the road to long-term solutions of this nation's fire problem.

3. Professional development in the fire service has made significant strides, but improvement is needed.

Professional development in the fire service was in an embryonic state when Wingspread I first called for its implementation 20 years ago. Shortly afterwards, the fire service and academia responded with a virtual explosion of educational opportunities expressly for the fire service offered at community colleges throughout the country. This made it possible for thousands of fire service personnel to advance their education. Wingspread I also noted that lack of mobility was a handicap to professionalization. That barrier has been lowered to the extent that the movement of chief officers and many specialized positions among fire departments is rapidly becoming an accepted practice.

Another especially important achievement has been the creation of the National Professional Qualifications Board to oversee development of a system of national standards for fire service positions. Many fire departments and state training agencies have instituted formal certification programs based on these standards. Those who have not done so should adopt similar certification programs as soon as possible.

4. Decision makers in local government need better criteria to determine an adequate level of cost-effective fire protection.

Economic pressure on local governments has resulted in drastic changes in the level of fire protection. Staffing has almost universally been reduced from the traditional five or six fire fighters per unit to as few as two in some departments.

Until recently, fire officials depended upon the insurance industry's Grading Schedule to justify their request for personnel and other resources. The de-emphasis on the Grading Schedule coupled with the economic pressures has resulted in many communities adopting new levels of fire protection without guidelines.

The U.S. Fire Administration's program for master planning was an effort to meet the need for criteria and guidelines. The objective of master planning is to provide the information and options which decision makers need to make intelligent choices. Unfortunately, master planning was considered a cumbersome and time consuming process which most fire departments were unwilling to undertake.

It is unrealistic to expect that a single criterion of fire protection can be applied to every jurisdiction. The fire protection needs of a rural community and a large metropolitan city are obviously quite different. Therefore, each community must ultimately make its own determination. Nevertheless, the fire service has a professional responsibility to provide decision makers with guidelines that will assist in maintaining an adequate level of community fire protection. Master planning is one approach. If the fire service is not prepared to implement master planning, it should then develop useful alternatives.

5. The fire service should review the effectiveness of the federal fire programs of the U.S. Fire Administration and the National Fire Academy to determine if they are of continued benefit in reducing the fire problem.

The Wingspread Conference report of 1966 encouraged establishing a federal fire focus to bring national attention to America's fire problem. Nearly every segment of the fire service united in a call for creation of a presidential commission, *America Burning*, a recommended Federal Government support to state and local governments and private fire organizations in their efforts to reduce fire deaths, injuries, and property losses. The concept of a federal focus received strong fire service support with the reservation that federal programs should complement and support rather than duplicate or replace efforts of state and other agencies including private fire organizations.

On the positive side, the Federal Government has been a catalyst in developing useful programs for master planning, public education and arson control. Also, the federal government gave important impetus to the research which led to the increase use of smoke detectors and the development of residential sprinkler systems.

Less positive achievements have been made by the National Fire Academy. The initial concept of the NFA was to fill the void in training for senior fire executives and to establish linkage with state training agencies. The NFA has been unable to achieve those objectives as originally intended.

It has been 13 years since the first federal fire agency was established. The fire service needs to assess what has been accomplished and at what cost. More importantly, the fire service should determine what if any, federal focus is required in the future.

6. The traditional role of fire departments is changing.

Fire departments were originally organized to fight fires. Over the years, this role has been expanded by adding various related services such as inspection services and fire prevention education. Regardless, extinguishment of fires continues to be the major focus of most fire departments.

The economics of providing local government services and, to some extent public opinion, is having a significant impact on what a fire department should be and do. Under the umbrella of "productivity," fire departments have either of their own accord, or by direction, expanded into a number of new service areas. Today many fire departments provide such services as advanced life support, emergency medical care and hazardous materials control. EMS, in particular, has become the dominant emergency service for many fire departments.

The addition of these new and diverse responsibilities has placed unusual strains on the organization and management of these fire departments. The recruitment, training and morale of personnel are all effected by changing roles which are not always clearly defined or understood.

The traditional structure and management techniques found in most fire departments needs re-examination. That examination should serve to determine if fire departments are appropriate agencies for responsibilities not directly related to fire protection and, if so, how best should fire departments be organized to carry out an expanded role.

7. Analyzing America's fire problem requires a more effective system of data collection.

Considerable progress has been made in identifying the type of data that is necessary to better assess the nation's fire problem. Efforts by the National Fire Protection Association and the United States Fire Administration have contributed to a better understanding of these data needs.

Although useful data is better identified, there is still a need for an improved system of *collecting* the data. A coordinated national system of data collection is required to better understand and cope with the nation's fire problem.

8. The misuse of alcohol and controlled substances is a serious fire service problem.

Misuse of alcohol and drugs has become a national problem affecting all segments of our society. It is not surprising, therefore, that the problem has also invaded the fire service.

Fire service personnel enjoy a unique public trust which carries responsibilities that may not be required of other public services. For that reason, the fire service must assume the leadership role in coping with this growing problem.

The focus should be on prevention and providing counseling or similar support to members of the service. Testing for drugs, even if unpleasant, may very well be a tool which both management and labor will have to accept. Personnel who cannot or who are unwilling to stop their dependency on alcohol or drugs should be dropped from the service.

9. There is a need for increased emphasis on fire fighter safety and health.

Deaths and injuries of fire fighters continue at an unacceptably high level. Unfortunately it is not possible to eliminate all risks in what is clearly a hazardous activity. Regardless, the fire service must expand its efforts to attain better protective equipment and require its use by personnel. However, equipment is not enough, there is a need to evaluate why fire fighters continue to be injured and killed. In this area, training should be evaluated to assure fire fighter recognition of potential injury or death situations.

In recent years, the fire service has become more concerned with health issues. Physical fitness programs are now included in the daily routine of many departments. Some departments provide professional counseling for stress management and weight control.

The progress toward better health and safety is encouraging. Nevertheless, there are at least two serious health issues which must be further examined. Career fire fighters demand automatic benefits for coronary related illnesses which they attribute as job related. If those

benefits are to be protected, fire fighters must also be prepared to accept the overwhelming evidence that shows a clear relationship between smoking and obesity to coronary disease.

Personnel management in the fire service is becoming increasingly more complex.

The relatively simple system of personnel management is rapidly being replaced by new and complicated procedures covering the relations between workers and managers. In the past, most organizational and personnel disputes could be resolved within the fire department hierarchy or, at least, within a traditional personnel system. Today resolution of even minor conflicts may require a highly formalized and costly process. Few fire service managers have been trained to understand or cope with many of these contemporary personnel issues.

Labor negotiations, productivity, affirmative action and personnel scheduling are but a few of the issues which require daily attention by fire department managers. Resolution of these issues requires sensitivity by both management and labor. Personnel management cannot be effective in a win-lose atmosphere or negotiations.

Fire service organizations and training officers need to place more emphasis on developing personnel management skills. This should be done in cooperation with academia and other professions by developing programs appropriate to the fire service personnel management needs.

Wingspread I, 1966
Statement of National Significance

1. Unprecedented demands are being imposed on the fire service by rapid social and technological change.
2. The public is complacent toward the rising trend of life and property loss by fire.
3. There is a serious lack of communication between the public and the fire service.
4. Behavior patterns of the public have a direct influence on the fire problem.
5. The insurance interest has exerted a strong influence on the organization of the fire service. This dominance seems to be waning. The fire service must provide the leadership in establishing realistic criteria for determining proper levels of fire protection.
6. Professional status begins with education.
7. The scope, degree and depth of the educational requirements for efficient functioning of the fire service must be examined.
8. Increased mobility at the executive level of the fire service will be important to the achievement of professional status.
9. The career development of the fire executive must be systematic and deliberate.
10. Governing bodies and municipal administrators generally do not recognize the need for executive development of the fire officer.
11. Fire service labor and management, municipal officers and administrators must join together if professionalism is to become a reality.
12. The traditional concept that fire protection is strictly a responsibility of local government must be re-examined.

Wingspread II, 1976
Statement of National Significance

1. New criteria are needed to measure the impact of fire on the national economy and public welfare.
2. Productivity in the fire service is difficult to measure reliably.
3. The state level of government may have to make a renewed commitment in dealing with the fire problem.
4. The fire service should approach the concept of regionalization without bias.
5. There is need for better liaison between the fire service and those who build or design buildings.
6. A means of deliberate and systematic development of all fire service personnel through the executive level is still needed. There is an educational void near the top.
7. The fire fighter has been suppressed by narrow education and confirming experiences on his job.
8. The problem of arson in the United States has increased to the point where it should be considered a matter of major importance.
9. Fire departments should thoroughly analyze new demands being placed upon them before accepting new responsibilities.
10. It appears that residential smoke detectors hold the most practical potential at this time for saving lives. The fire service should take leadership in encouraging their widespread use and proper maintenance.
11. Traditional fire loss management concepts should be reviewed.
12. The Fire Service should assume more responsibility and leadership in fire loss management.

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