

Life Safe History

Updated January 2008

For many years FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, provided funding to local governments to operate fire prevention programs, but found that when the grant money stopped — the local programs stopped. In the early 1980's, FEMA tried a new approach ... it asked the governors of 30 states to select three cities – one large, one medium, and one small; then asked their mayors to invite a local non-profit organization in each city to design its own city fire prevention program. The FEMA grants provided \$10,000 each year for the first three years.

West Virginia was one of the 30 states selected to participate; Governor Arch Moore chose Charleston as WV's large city; and Mayor Mike Roark chose the Charleston Regional Chamber of Commerce as the catalyst to design and execute the new safety program. Town Center Mall had just opened, many buildings in the city were empty, and a wave of new construction was in progress, therefore many employees, customers and citizens were in new and unfamiliar commercial locations. The Chamber decided to focus on commercial buildings of 20,000 square feet and larger within Charleston's city limits. In the second year, the community volunteer fire prevention program was transformed into **Life Safe**.

Life Safe started in 1986 with 13 buildings in Charleston. The first Fire Warden Training Seminar was held in the spring of 1987. The cities of South Charleston and Dunbar joined the program in 1990; and St. Albans became a **Life Safe** partner in 1991. We currently have 124 buildings in the program (a list of the 2007 participants is attached). Cathryn Gibbs Harris –

a public relations/marketing consultant, Dale Petry – Director of the Office of Emergency Services for Kanawha County, and John Thomas – Property Manager for BB&T, are the only original members remaining. Harris has served as chair and coordinator since January 1993. The Chamber stopped sponsoring and support for **Life Safe** in 1995.

You might ask: “Why should I be concerned with knowing how to evacuate or shelter-in-place?” The Kanawha Valley has a high likelihood of experiencing a disaster due to flooding and chemical production. The key to disaster response is disaster preparedness. There are two types of disasters – natural, and man-made. Man-made disasters have several causes – terrorists, accidents, facility/equipment neglect or malfunction, and disgruntled employees/former employees or the general public. They may not like something your organization/company did, or what you manufacture, or represent, i.e. abortion clinics.

The goal of **Life Safe** is to improve the safety of our citizens and prevent the loss of life. HOW?

- Educate participants to recognize a safe environment.
- Raise their level of awareness of Fire Safety (at work and at home).
- Encourage them to be proactive not reactive during emergency situations.
- Instruct them on when and how to safely evacuate a facility.
- Teach them when and how to safely stay inside (shelter-in-place).
- Improve safety standards at business/community/living locations.

Participants must meet four criteria:

1. Designate fire wardens throughout the facility who will assist with evacuation; and provide a minimum of two hours of annual training for each.
2. Perform two annual fire/emergency drills; and maintain records.
3. The property manager shall provide an evacuation plan. Escape routes must be posted throughout the building.
4. A current fire safety inspection must be conducted by the appropriate fire department.

Life Safe costs absolutely no money to participate, but could save participants thousands of dollars, or more, in the loss of life and property. In the past, our annual luncheon was sponsored by BB&T and WV American Water; in 2005 and 2006, the Charleston Jobs Corps sponsored the training seminars; and the Kanawha County Emergency Ambulance Authority sponsored the May 2007 full-day seminar. This is how volunteers have maintained this vital program at no cost to participants.

In order to take **Life Safe** to the next level – include more cities, more buildings, and state government facilities within the county – the committee needs to employ a part-time Executive Director to oversee the tremendous time requirements to complete these tasks. Funding has been difficult.

Although the first three years were financed by the grant, today the only funding is thru donations – monetary and in-kind. These pay for mailings, copying, and the annual October luncheon where participants are honored and certificates presented.

In mid-summer 2007, the Kanawha County Commission issued a one-time grant of \$5,000 to help us acquire computer equipment, pay for the luncheon, mailing expenses, and to print handouts, etc.

The program continues to exist 22 years later because of the generous support of the above businesses, our Mayors, and especially because of the volunteers who provide information, training, coordination, mailings, one-on-one contact, and plain hard work. Committee members are volunteers who represent four professional fire departments, the State Fire Marshal's office, other county and city officials and first responders, the Charleston Job Corps, the Charleston Newspapers, and business leaders throughout Kanawha County. Although no one is paid to work for **Life Safe**, everyone is very dedicated and always welcome new ideas, members, and opportunities.

Life Safe is a continuing commitment; participants must go through the process every year. It is a recognition program that encourages the building owner/manager to properly prepare employees/tenants, visitors/customers to safely evacuate themselves and others from the facility, or to shelter-in-place, in an emergency. **Life Safe** also acknowledges that participants have undergone a current fire inspection and two annual fire drills. We do not certify that each building meets every fire code. Attached is a handout explaining the federal laws that pertain to participants' legal responsibilities.

The committee conducts annual training every Spring for fire wardens. In 2008, two learning events will be held at different locations in the county. The half-day seminars include hands-on training at no cost to attendees. Seminar dates are Thursday, April 10, and Thursday, May 1, 2008. Locations will be announced early in 2008.

The Kanawha Valley **Life Safe** program is one of the few and maybe the only one remaining from the FEMA proposal in the early 1980's. Over the past 20 years we have adjusted our program and training seminars to meet emerging issues and society's changing needs, i.e.

shelter-in-place, Homeland Security, bomb threats, methamphetamine production, workplace safety, first-aid, flu epidemics, and more. Committee members also help participants prepare evacuation plans, or revise/improve their current ones. Our work is never-ending; but we are dedicated.

The Charleston Public Safety Council has bestowed **Life Safe** with several awards. October 10, 2006, the Council presented a proclamation praising the fire prevention and evacuation program's work and results over the past twenty years.

West Virginia's State Fire Marshal, Sterling Lewis, endorses the **Life Safe** program, as do all the Mayors and Fire Chiefs in our four-city area. In 2007, the Kanawha County Commission gave us a small one-time grant to assist with expenses and purchase computer equipment. Also in 2007, the committee tried again to add the City of Nitro to the program; however, due to lack of interest, the city has not joined us.