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Fire Summit II
May 26, 2008
Life Safety Issues in Residential Structures
Final Report

In 2006, Edmonton's Fire Rescue Service convened their first Fire Summit, a one-day session focus on raising awareness of issues associated with the Province's building code. This very successful event, attended by stakeholders across the province and leaders at the municipal level, drew significant provincial and national attention and ultimately initiated a process culminating in the development of 22 Ministerial recommendations impacting the building code (18 enacted this spring).

Two years later, and building on the successes of this first event, Fire Rescue organized a second Fire Summit, intended to bring significant municipal and provincial attention to the fire rescue needs of individuals not capable of self preservation during an emergency. Held in late May 2008, the second Summit provided an opportunity for government representatives, fire service representatives, health care officials, and community stakeholders to meet and discuss the associated life-safety issues for at-risk populations.

The summit explored three issues:

- Aging in place – individuals who have lived in a residence designed and classed to their original needs. As they have aged, their age associated disabilities have come to exceed the safety standards of the class of the residence they call home.
- Inappropriate occupancy – Edmonton has experienced significant growth in the population of seniors and persons with disabilities. Unfortunately, there has not been corresponding growth in the residences appropriate to their needs (Class B homes). Caregivers, challenged to find suitable accommodations for this population, have tried to respond to this pressure by housing these individuals in Class C residences – accommodations not appropriate for the self preservation needs of these individuals. Edmonton's Fire Services' Fire Prevention is under considerable pressure to approve Class C residences for individuals whose self preservation needs are not satisfied by the safety plans for the buildings housing this population.
- Single family dwellings as group homes – due to growth in demand and inadequate supply, single family homes are being converted into group homes. However, this style of residential housing has not been constructed with the unique preservation needs of the targeted population in mind.

Over 60 participants attended the second summit and provided input to these issues. This document is a summary of the comments, questions and feedback gathered at the session and will be distributed to all participants and key officials. Over the course of the day, participants were asked a number of questions and their responses were recorded. This document captures the questions posed and the feedback and suggested actions solicited across several related themes.

Aging in Place

Increasingly, seniors are aging in residences that unfortunately can no longer meet their needs from a safety perspective.

DRAFT

Participants generated a number of ideas to help resolve this issue. These ideas have been grouped as follows:

Upgrading

- Upgrading/retrofitting of current residences
 - Add flame resistant materials, etc.
 - Install sprinkler systems
 - Install other retrofitting as required to ensure safety of the residence
 - Work with building maintenance staff to facilitate the upgrading process in condominiums and rental units
 - Develop and implement a forced majeure clause
 - Develop and implement standardized rules, legislation and safety plans for application across Edmonton
- Upgrading of the skills of emergency response personnel and others called to assist during an emergency
 - Ensure firefighters, building managers and staff at care facilities are fully trained on safety procedures, safety plans and other processes meant to ensure resident preservation

Education

- Redesign public education to raise awareness of the issues involved, particularly amongst residents and consumers – public education campaigns should be respectful, however, of individual choice, knowing that these residences are “home” to many
- Develop public education targeted to at-risk groups, including seniors, persons with disabilities and the like
- Create a plain language brochure as part of a targeted public education campaign
- Conduct internal audits of facilities housing those not capable of self-preservation, including accountability measures to ensure required improvements are implemented
- Develop and implement information campaigns detailing how to make one’s home or extended care facility safer
- Develop a fire plan for each facility, in consultation with residents, so they can learn to help themselves
- Educate all building managers on the importance of maintaining an up to date list of all residents requiring assistance in the event of a fire emergency

Clarity

- Enhance clarity of terms used to ensure all involved have the same level of understanding of the issues. Clear definitions of “aging in place,” “transitions,” “interim loss of ability,” “choices,” and “capable of self-preservation” are required
- Create of an inventory of facilities

DRAFT

- Improve the interface between the following sectors—fire services, developers, building managers, support agencies, safety codes groups, permit and licensing agencies
- Develop acceptable evacuation plans and standardize fire code enforcement

Partnerships

- Enhance communication and coordination across government stakeholders
- Strengthen the provincial/municipal government relationship to ensure both parties regularly converse on these and other safety-related concerns
- Develop an advisory committee responsible for overseeing concerns and administering recommendations
- Encourage a sense of community amongst residents to ensure people assume responsibility for each other

Resources

- Increase funding for incentives for developers to retrofit existing residential units, including adding sprinkler systems and/or upgrading alarm systems
- Foster political support for any new legislation arising from this and other work
- Secure support for increased resources for inspection and enforcement
- Ensure Provincial and municipal government support for family caregivers
- Develop mechanisms to facilitate cost sharing
- Increase funding to streamline permits, increase staffing levels at facilities and provide ongoing support for this work
- Ensure during the sale and/or renting of these residences that occupancy is limited to the ground level for certain individuals

Punitive Approaches

- Establish and strictly enforce benchmarks and standards for these residences

Inappropriate Occupancy

Many seniors are living in accommodations designed to be occupied by the able-bodied population — Class C accommodation — when they require B2 residences. Participants were asked first to consider strategies to eliminate this issue completely, then were tasked with identifying mechanisms to address the issue when it does occur.

Eliminating the Issue:

- Partnerships/Collaboration – enhance collaborative efforts and partnerships of all involved to plan better together, beginning with architects and developers
- Pre-planning – develop appropriate fire plans for all residences, new and old, to help ensure the safety of all inhabitants
- Identify and clarify the issues – so all involved share a common understanding
- Address the information gap – share information and communicate issues with all involved and enforce safety measures

DRAFT

- Education of all involved – including landlords, tenants, owners, families and the general public on the implications of inappropriate occupancy
- Balance safety with affordability – many at-risk populations cannot afford the upgrades required. Any measures taken to ensure public safety must be affordable to all who will benefit
- Provincial/municipal funding – increased funding to build and upgrade more B2 facilities, create more space for B2 beds, and to provide incentives for builders to construct B2 residences
- Accountability – ensure regular enforcement of standards and develop punitive measures for those not complying
- Improved communication – between all parties, but especially between those providing permits and licensing

Addressing the Issue:

- Staffing – more staff are required, as is better training for those already providing long-term care and assistance
- Retrofits/Upgrading – of C class accommodations using new technology, construction of a fire proof enclosure, smoke barriers within floor areas, non-combustible building materials and so on
- Inspection and enforcement – development of tools to evaluate occupant capacity and provide regular assessment and enforcement
- Education – development of a targeted education program for owners and managers, as well as to heighten public awareness of the issue
- New code – development of a new Occupancy Classification between C Class and B2 (using Ontario as an example)
- Role clarity – ensure all parties involved clearly understand their roles and responsibilities in working towards solutions
- Provincial/municipal funding – increased funding to hire more staff, expand and upgrade existing B2 facilities, and create more space for B2 beds
- Partnerships – ensure greater alignment across and communication between all stakeholders, including architects, developers, building owners/managers, and Edmonton Fire Rescue
- Best practices – explore the best practices arising from experiences in other jurisdictions, including Ontario
- Task Group – create a Task Group or Provincial Agency focused on the creation and administration of B3 residences

Single Family Dwellings as Group Homes

The use of single family residences as group housing for seniors and cognitively or physically challenged residents is evolving at a rate faster than Edmonton's Fire Rescue Service is able to track. To help manage this issue, participants were asked to identify solutions and/or actions to help facilitate management of this issue. These actions are groups as follows:

Funding

- Provide financial incentives for retrofits to existing residences
- Tie individual funding to an operator's license and inspections (failure to pass the inspection limits the funding available or inhibits it completely)
- Provide additional funding to help residents adhere to the code and other legislated standards
- Ensure adequate funding for affordable housing, for accessible new units with additional fire protection measures, and for those on AISH, so they can afford safe housing

Information Sharing

- Provide Edmonton's Fire Rescue Service with an area list
- Share the information arising from inspections, as well as other safety related information, with AISH
- Provide more communication to renters
- Amend FOIP to facilitate information sharing across all streams
- Develop targeted awareness programs for owners and families aimed at enhancing personal accountability for housing choices
- Enhance collaboration across all agencies, including placement organizations, social services, health services, and other related groups
- Create key public messages

Licensing

- Facilitate the multi-agency development of minimum standards, mandatory licensing and fire safety plans
- Close the loophole that exempts homes with under four residences
- Develop and implement a new B3 Occupancy Classification in the Building code
- Ensure Fire Rescue is made aware of buildings that do not pass the requirements needed to ensure the safety of their residents
- Develop mandatory licensing for groups homes, with required, regular inspections

Clarity

- Develop a consistent, standardized, province-wide definition for group homes, including how they differ from boarding houses
- Develop a comprehensive list of group home operators, their tenants, and the location of these residences

Inspection and Enforcement

- Ensure a consistent approach and schedule for inspections and the strict enforcement of standards when residences are found to be non-compliant
- Create an anonymous reporting mechanism, such as an inspection hotline, to allow individuals to report and trigger an inspection
- Develop and provide operator education regarding responsibility and accountability

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Action Plan to Improve Life Safety Issues in Residential Structures

Having identified key solutions across several themes, participants were then asked to prepare an action plan on these living safety issues and identify priority initiatives on which to commence work as quickly as possible. Participants noted the following:

- Create a multi-agency Task Force or Coordination Committee to substantiate the breadth of the issue, create an inventory of Class B and C residences, research best practices, develop a long-term action plan, and provide input on new legislation
- Develop a communications plan and/or targeted education programs designed to inform key stakeholders of the issue, heighten awareness, and help residents and families understand the hazards in their building
- Develop and implement a reporting mechanism to allow individuals to report accommodations believed to not meet the fire rescue needs of individuals incapable of self preservation during an emergency
- Develop consistent standards for safety, smoke alarms, sprinklers, passive protection measures, and emergency procedure plans
- Create and implement a consistent, province-wide definition of living safety issues