

# Fire Summit V

## Edmonton Fire Rescue Services

Summary Report

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Fire Summit is to bring together stakeholders from across the province and Canada to explore fire safety issues and to find solutions to those identified. The topic of Fire Summit V was fire safety in Alberta's residential care facilities.

After a day of presentations from all perspectives affecting residential facility fire safety and discussing the issues in groups, participants developed an agenda for action on improving fire safety in residential care facilities in Alberta:

- Develop a Common Definition of Care
- Effective Use of a Residential Care Safety Task Force
- Develop an Inventory of Existing Facilities
- Immediately Adopt the B3 Classification
- Ensure Compliance through Enforcement and Incentives
- Emphasize the Importance of Education

Detailed descriptions of this agenda and assessments from the presentations are described in this report.

## PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

The topic of fire safety in residential care facilities has been discussed at the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) conferences over the past several years. Legislation has not kept pace with the growing demand and needs for these vulnerable peoples. Fire tragedies across the country have highlighted the complexity in dealing with the demographic and growing healthcare trends.

In his remarks to open the Summit and the day, **Edmonton Fire Rescue Services Chief Ken Block** reminded participants of their collective responsibility to ensure that the most vulnerable Albertans are safe in their own homes and environments. By acting as a forum for participants to speak frankly, identify areas of concern and pursue realistic solutions, the Summit can build momentum for positive change. Inappropriate safety measures should not be tolerated and incidents like L'Isle-Verte are preventable. Chief Block concluded with the notion that facilities for the most vulnerable must be code compliant and that the right people must be in the right place for the right reasons; an idea that would be returned to throughout the day.

## BACKGROUND FACTS FROM PRESENTATIONS

From the individual experience of surviving a fire in a facility, to new standards being set on a national level, the Summit explored the full range of issues and potential solutions before determining what action needed to be taken. From these presentations, a set of commonly understood facts emerged describing the landscape of fire safety in residential care facilities in Alberta:

- Our aging population is a significant demographic challenge that will result in a substantial increase in the need for safe residential care facilities.
- Alberta has a large inventory of care facilities that do not meet the safety needs of their residents and will need to be upgraded.
- Alberta needs to follow suit with the national B3 requirements and adopt Ontario's retrofit initiative ensuring a consistent standard of safety.
- Sprinklers are an assured, tested means of providing significant fire safety in care facilities.
- Retrofit upgrades must be a part of the strategy for existing non-compliant residential care facilities.
- Solutions to fire safety issues depend on collaboration across all stakeholders.
- This is an issue of safety for not only residents but for all occupants including emergency services personnel.

## TOP PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

Participants were asked to reflect on what they had heard throughout the presentations and, as groups, were asked to identify the top priorities for action that will result in positive change for residential care safety in Alberta. From this input, the following agenda emerged:

### **Develop a Common Definition of Care**

The formalized definition of care that exists as part of the Fire and Building Codes does not align with the definition used by the Province or care providers. A common definition needs to be established and clearly communicated to everyone involved in the delivery of residential care.

### **Effective Use of a Residential Care Safety Task Force**

Participants identified the development of a Provincial Task Force on Fire Safety in Care Facilities as an effective solution. This Task Force should bring together every stakeholder involved in delivering, governing or regulating residential care. The ultimate mandate of this Task Force should be to speak with one voice, developing shared priorities and uniform recommendations for the province through constructive, barrier-free conversations.

### **Develop an Inventory of Existing Facilities**

Participants wanted a thorough inventory of current stock and standardized assessment of all existing care facilities, including those that are unlicensed. The information provided will be utilized to determine, on a priority basis, what kind of care is being provided, what are the risks to occupants and which facilities are non-compliant and require attention.

### **Immediately Adopt the B3 Classification**

There was an urgent call for the Government of Alberta to adopt the B3 classification into the Alberta Building Code. Developing new and retrofitting existing buildings under this standard are vital to addressing a set of safety needs for the occupants. An example of the safety features B3 provides is the inclusion of sprinklers.

### **Ensure Compliance Through Enforcement and Incentives**

Existing facility owners cannot reasonably be expected to comply with new regulations immediately upon adoption of the new standards. There is an issue of logistics as well as funding; low-interest government loans, planning a retro-fit phase-in schedule and providing tools and reference guides are creative solutions available to create incentives and implement compliance. While compliance was presented with a sense of urgency, there was also a significant call to ensure that any action would be taken responsibly and sustainably. Those creating new facilities would need to adhere to the new regulations.

### **Emphasize the Importance of Education**

Participants wanted to see practical programming for care providers that delivered training and education focused on topics such as; developing and executing evacuation plans, a full understanding of current life safety standards and legislation, and matching dwelling and level of care to individual need. This applies directly to the staff of the facilities, but must also be extended to those developing the buildings, owners, facility operators, tenants and their families. Educating the public on the impact of C, B3 and B2 standards and how each is applied to a particular level of care can build support for the adoption of the B3 standard in the building code.

## **CONCLUSION**

Edmonton Fire Rescue Services Chief Ken Block opened Fire Summit V with the statement that fire safety in residential care facilities in Alberta must strive toward ensuring that the right people are in the right places, for the right reasons to protect Alberta's most vulnerable citizens. Participants came to the Summit understanding that Alberta is falling short of this aspiration and took it on directly, responding to the moral imperative to facilitate the required changes.

Safety in residential care facilities continues to remain in the public consciousness. A recent publication highlighting the number of residential care facilities without sprinklers has gained the attention of the media in resolving this issue. Now is time to step forward, accept responsibility and provide leadership to provide safe and secure homes for our most vulnerable.