



**FIRE PREVENTION AND SAFETY  
IN THE CITY OF EL PASO  
A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Summary Report**

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**Prepared by**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The mission of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), an international nonprofit established in 1896, is to reduce the worldwide burden of fire and other hazards on the quality of life by providing and advocating consensus codes and standards, research, training, and education. As the world's leading advocate of fire prevention and an authoritative source on public safety, NFPA develops, publishes, and disseminates more than 300 consensus codes and standards intended to minimize the possibility and effects of fire and other risks.

The process of educating the public about fire prevention and fire safety faces many challenges, not the least of which is effectively communicating to citizens that residential fires can be serious and that taking proper precautions is in one's best interest.

The City of El Paso, Texas, recently experienced an increase in deaths resulting from residential fires. El Paso averaged about 3 fire deaths a year until 2010, when the number rose to 11. In the early part of 2011, eight more people died in residential fires.

NFPA has been working with the El Paso Fire Department (EPFD) to help create a strategy to reach residents and teach them about fire hazards and prevention.

## **OBJECTIVES**

NFPA's main objective has been to investigate and explore the most effective ways for the EPFD to reach residents with fire prevention information or smoke alarm installation, especially in high-risk neighborhoods in El Paso.

Through qualitative research, NFPA explored the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of the residents of El Paso as they relate to all aspects of fire under the following main topics:

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- Current awareness and opinions towards fires and fire prevention;
- Exploration of fire education needs and opportunities;
- Assessment of EPFD's community and public opinion strengths and potential ways to transfer brand equities;
- Prioritization and evaluation of EPFD initiatives;
- Assessment of public participation in EPFD's initiatives, such as fire alarm installation and other educational efforts;
- Exploration of emotional hot buttons for the creation of communication messages; and
- Exploration of cultural information or consumer behavior relevant to fire prevention strategies.

## **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

In 2010, the people of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity comprised about 80 percent of El Paso's population of about 650,000. The city is on the U.S. border, adjacent to Juarez, Mexico. To escape the drug-related violence in Juarez and other nearby smaller towns, many people have moved to El Paso. In addition, El Paso is home to the Ft. Bliss army base, which since 2008 has added almost 40,000 troops and their families, many of whom live off base in rental property.

People 18 years old and younger make up 29.1 percent of the population, while people older than 65 make up another 11.2 percent. Foreign-born people account for 25.8 percent of the population.

After initial meetings with EPFD and NFPA, we identified eight main groups as priorities:

1. High-Risk: Lower-income, working parents of children 0 to 7 years of age.  
Household incomes of \$20,000 to \$30,000.
2. General Population: Married and single residents, both renters and homeowners.  
Household incomes of \$30,000 to \$70,000
3. Seniors: Married or single adults ages 65 to 80 who live in their own homes or apartments.

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4. Single Moms: Lower- and middle-income single mothers of children 0 to 14 years of age.
5. High-Risk Spanish-Dependent: Lower-income, working parents of children 0 to 7 years of age. Household incomes of \$20,000 to \$30,000. Spanish-language-dependent.
6. General Population Spanish-Dependent: Married and single residents, both renters and homeowners. Household incomes of \$30,000 to \$70,000. Spanish-language-dependent.
7. Seniors Spanish-Dependent: Married or single adults ages 65 to 80 who live in their own homes or apartments. Spanish-language-dependent.
8. Single Moms Spanish-Dependent: Lower- and middle-income single mothers of children 0 to 14 years of age. Spanish-language-dependent.

We conducted a focus group session for each of the targeted groups over two days. We held groups for English speakers on March 2, 2011, and for Spanish speakers on March 3, 2011. Each group consisted of six to eight participants and lasted approximately two hours.

The following table summarizes the research design:

<b>Day</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>
March 2	1	10:00 a.m.	Seniors
	2	2:00 p.m.	Single Moms
	3	5:00 p.m.	General Population
	4	7:00 p.m.	High Risk population
March 3	5	10:00 a.m.	Seniors Spanish
	6	2:00 p.m.	Single Moms Spanish
	7	5:00 p.m.	General Population Spanish
	8	7:00 p.m.	High Risk population Spanish

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## STATEMENT OF LIMITATIONS

A focus group is a qualitative research technique that seeks to develop insights and direction, rather than precise measures of the participants' behaviors. Because of the relatively small number of interviews conducted and the recruitment and screening process used, the work is exploratory in nature. Thus, the findings in this report should be viewed as directives, not as statistically projectable to, or representative of, the views of any larger population.

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Many of the study's participants were aware of one or two of the recent tragic fires that have occurred in El Paso. They did not know, however, that the number of fire-related deaths has been rising in the past two years. Also, they did not consider the possibility of a fire in their own home to be of major concern. Participants reported that their most pressing issue is providing for their families, both financially and emotionally. As a result, they worry primarily about their health and then about having a job, making sure their families would be covered if they were to have an accident or die prematurely, and being financially and physically able to take care of themselves in retirement so as not to be a burden to their families.

Based on these many other concerns, it is not surprising that very few participants had made a fire escape plan that they had practiced, or at least shared, with their families. Nevertheless, it was reassuring to know that the majority of the participants did understand that a home fire can happen to them, even though most of them liked to believe otherwise.

In addition, participants demonstrated that they are somewhat knowledgeable about fire safety and prevention. Though older adults—especially those who live alone in single-family homes built before a smoke alarm code was implemented—trail the rest of the group in owning smoke alarms, most of the participants had implemented some type of preventive measures around the house, such as installing smoke alarms and unlocking the iron bars on their windows. Some of these actions were a direct result of media coverage of the recent increase in fires in the city. In many cases, safety messages from the El Paso Fire Department followed news reports and included publicity for the city's free smoke alarm installation campaign. In addition, some parents received fire safety education from their children's elementary schools.

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Focus group participants tended to minimize and downplay fire incidents within their home. Participants often discounted small fires within the home and did not consider them to have been true emergencies. Awareness of basic components of fire prevention, along with what the participants called “common sense” prevention, might have given them a false sense of security. For example, they may have believed that, as long as no one plays with matches, they have nothing to worry about. Or, as long as they had a smoke alarm it would activate whenever there is a fire, even if they had never tested or maintained it.

The area in which the participants needed the most help was in escape planning. Though most knew what should be included in a fire escape plan, only a few had ever practiced a fire drill at home. This might be because they underestimated the danger of a potential fire, they did not like to think about the possibility of a fire, or they procrastinated because they have more pressing concerns. Some mentioned that a complete home fire escape plan had never been presented to them, while others didn't want to upset family members by broaching the topic. Non-Hispanic participants were more likely to have a plan, as were those who had worked in structured professions, such as the military, where fire safety, including drills, is emphasized.

These responses suggest the need for a more complete, cohesive program that includes all fire prevention and escape planning components. Having previously gotten such information in bits and pieces from different sources, the participants had trouble knowing where to begin in developing their own plans. While they agreed that the responsibility for having a plan falls on each of them individually, the participants also felt they could use help. Among the sources the participants believed they might turn to for information were the media, local code and ordinance enforcers, schools, the fire department, and community outreach programs.

Of the EPPD's current or proposed initiatives, three stood out to participants. First, outreach to schools was very popular. Participants pointed to the importance of instilling fire safety messages at an early age, but also to the challenge of making sure that parents of

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preschool and elementary school children pay attention to the messages children bring home from school. The outreach program for teenagers was particularly well received by many participants, who noted that it would not only help close the gap between what kids learn about fire safety in elementary school and how they can put it in practice as adults, but that it might also be a way to keep them safe and out of trouble. Participants further thought this initiative might even be the beginning of a career for some.

Second, most participants agreed that teaching fire safety to older adults at senior centers and other gathering places is a good idea, especially if volunteers could do the work, freeing firefighters to be on call at the station.

Third, participants supported the idea of home visits to conduct safety surveys or install smoke alarms, though they seemed to prefer the outreach initiatives cited above from an economic, time, and ease of delivery standpoint. While they agreed that firefighters play a vital role in educating the public about fire prevention, they also worried about expecting a fire department to visit every home in the city. An additional drawback to this type of program, according to participants, could be some residents' hesitation to open the door to strangers. To overcome such obstacles, participants suggested advance notice of any home visits, similar to the messages they received during the census. Some also suggested that media coverage of such a program could raise enough awareness to inspire people to install smoke alarms on their own.

When we asked participants what they thought was the best way to reach the public with fire safety information, they suggested a public awareness campaign. We believe that a long-term campaign would not only inform El Paso residents about fire safety and prevention, but would also aim at modifying attitudes and altering cultural factors that have a bearing on fire prevention. According to the participants, an effective campaign should include a catchy slogan or tune that everyone can remember and should be disseminated through all available media to create the needed awareness.

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The need for more focused education about fire safety, prevention, and escape plans was reinforced by the heightened motivation of the focus group attendees at the end of the meeting. Most participants left with a much better understanding of what they needed to do to stay safe from fire safety and to develop a home fire escape plan. Several even said that they would check their smoke alarms, talk about their escape plans with their families, and make sure they could open their windows as soon as they got home. Once reminded of the dangers and made aware of the need for a cohesive plan, the participants felt more in control and able to take appropriate action.

In its exploration of El Paso residents' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward fire, this study provides detailed information to help the El Paso Fire Department find the most effective ways to disseminate fire prevention information and install smoke alarms, especially in high-risk neighborhoods.

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## KEY FINDINGS

### Attitudes and Awareness

All focus group participants felt responsible for providing for their families, both financially and emotionally. They also felt responsible for their own health, as they did not want to become a burden their children, especially the senior citizens interviewed. Several also said they felt responsible for protecting their loved ones and for setting a good example for their children, their employees, their students, and others.

When we asked participants specifically about their worries for the future, most said they were afraid their health would keep them from providing for their families. The second worry on the list was finances, which for most translated into having a job that allowed them to provide for their loved ones. Participants also mentioned the fear of death or accidents and the need for health and life insurance, as well as retirement benefits and social security. Only a couple of participants mentioned violence, and only two in the Spanish-language groups mentioned, unaided, the possibility of a home fire.

### The Possibility of a Home Fire

When asked specifically about home fires, participants from all the groups agreed that there was always a possibility of fire and that a fire could happen to anyone. For most participants, however, the possibility of a home fire was not a main concern. They said that they get so involved in more pressing issues in their daily lives, such as making a living and caring for their families that they simply didn't worry about the possibility of a home fire. Even if the thought briefly crossed their minds, they didn't usually act upon it. As one participant noted, "All the recent fires made me think about it, so I got some smoke alarms, but I have not installed them yet; they are still in the box."

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The lack of concern is not necessarily apathy or cynicism. The most common responses from participants as to why home fires were not a big concern were:

- They had not experienced one first-hand.  
*“You only think about it when it happens to you or someone you know; when it hits home.”*
- They didn’t really think it could happen to them.  
*“That is something that happens to others, someone in another neighborhood, but not to us.”*
- They had a false sense of security and believed that they were exempt because they took some random precautionary actions and didn’t put themselves in dangerous situations.  
*“The recent fires happened because people were trying to heat up their house with the oven, but I don’t do that. I don’t have that problem because I keep my furnace up-to-date and check everything.”*  
*“I don’t have iron bars on my windows so I am not going to get trapped, and that’s why that family died.”*  
*“I am vigilant that my daughter doesn’t burn candles in her room.”*
- They were not aware of the magnitude of a fire and believed they could actually control one.  
*“I don’t worry about it too much; I’ve had a couple of little incidents, such as burning a pot.”*

One participant even said that she could not go through life worrying about everything and added that “One does the best we can and the rest is up to God.” Along the same lines, another said that other bad things have a higher probability of happening, adding that burglary was a bigger concern.

### **Fire Prevention**

For the most part, participants were aware of the basic components of fire prevention and many had implemented a couple of them. However, very few actually had a complete plan that they had thought about, talked about, and acted upon with their families.

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When asked what fire prevention meant to them, participants mentioned taking following actions, which most of them saw as common sense, something they just grew up knowing:

- Checking electrical outlets;
- Installing and checking smoke alarms and making sure the batteries worked;
- Having a fire extinguisher and knowing how to use it;
- Checking the stove and making sure appliances were unplugged before leaving the house;
- Talking to their children about the danger of fire play;
- Keeping flammables away from children and, if possible, out of the house in a ventilated place;
- Servicing the water heater and furnace; and
- Having fire insurance and making sure it is paid.

Having fire insurance was definitely a concern to several participants in the English-speaking groups, who saw it as a main part of their fire safety plan. Participants noted that, although people's lives are definitely much more important than material possessions, they were terrified of losing everything and being homeless. These participants clearly had a plan for their material possessions, but most of them had no plan to safeguard themselves and their loved ones.

### **Smoke Alarms**

The majority of participants had at least one smoke alarm installed in their homes. The rate of smoke alarm ownership among the general population and the high-risk participants in both the Spanish- and English-speaking groups was 100 percent. All but one of the single mothers in each language group owned a smoke alarm.

The trailing group was the senior citizens, especially those in the English-speaking group, only 50 percent of whom had a smoke alarm in their homes. This was probably because these seniors live by themselves in single-family homes that were most likely built before

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implementation of a smoke alarm code. Seniors in the English-speaking group who did have smoke alarms recalled installing them themselves or having them installed by a contractor, such as “the roof guy” or “the furnace guy”. This confirms that their homes did not originally have smoke alarms and indicates that, had it not been suggested by contractors doing home repairs, they might still not have one.

Several participants in this group mentioned having rental property and they were all aware of the smoke alarm requirements for rental housing. However, they were unsure about the requirements in homes they owned.

The surprisingly high number of alarm owners among the high-risk groups was probably due to the fact that most lived in rental homes or apartments in which landlords are required to install smoke alarms and that, in the case of some apartment complexes, inspectors schedule maintenance visits to make sure that the smoke alarms work properly. Most participants in all the groups were aware of the requirements for smoke alarms in rental units. One participant, who was a real estate agent, added that smoke alarms are also required to obtain a home loan under the FHA guidelines and that smoke alarms are an item on the seller’s disclosure for a home sale contract.

Even though most participants had smoke alarms, they did not all test their alarms regularly, and a few didn’t know if their smoke alarms were in working condition. Those who did not test their alarms regularly said that smoke alarms beep if they need their batteries replaced and that they relied on that.

*“If they don’t beep, we assume they are good to go.”*

Participants stated they had burned food while cooking and smoke alarms subsequently sounded. One man said he checked his alarm by blowing out a candle under it.

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Participants in both groups of seniors mentioned the importance of recognizing the sound of the alarm to act in a timely manner.

*“One must test the smoke alarm in order to get familiar with the sound.”*

### **Security Iron Bars on Windows**

Many homes in El Paso have iron security bars on their windows to keep burglars out. In most homes, these bars are fixed and permanent. Others can be opened, but their locks have not been touched in decades, in effect turning the homes into a prison.

Participants mentioned that a recently implemented requirement called for new security bars to have a quick release system that opens the bars from the inside in case of an emergency. Many homes, however, still have the old style bars, including the homes of several participants.

A couple of participants said they had taken the locks off their iron bars after hearing news reports that bars were the main cause of deaths in a recent fire. Another said she was forced to take hers out “because the loan officer would not approve the loan with the bars.”

### **Personal Experiences with Home Fires**

Except for two participants in the Spanish-speaking groups whose homes burned down when they were younger and living in Mexico, the rest had not experienced a serious fire themselves. However, some talked about fires close to home:

*“My son heated up a tortilla and left the paper that separates them, and it got burned and he threw it to the trash can and the whole kitchen caught fire.”*

*“I live in the apartment complex where one of the recent fires happened, and the family was trapped inside and everybody died.”*

*“It happened to one of the families in the middle school where I work and that made me think about it.”*

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These participants mentioned thinking about doing something to make sure that they didn't experience a fire, but none of them actually followed up with a complete home fire escape plan.

### **Awareness of Recent Fires in the City of El Paso**

Most participants were aware of the recent tragic fires in El Paso and knew where they had occurred, the number and ages of those who had died, and the fires' causes. They noted that some of the fires were started by faulty or inappropriate heating appliances. They also pointed out that most of the victims did not have a smoke alarm and, in one case, the family could not escape because their windows were blocked by iron bars. They added that most of the fires had taken place in older neighborhoods where the houses were more likely to have the iron bars on the windows and no smoke alarms.

A few participants said they had taken some precautions as a result of the recent increase in fires, including unlocking the iron bars on their windows and buying smoke alarms, though not necessarily installing them. One even started talking about a home fire escape plan with her husband. The majority of participants admitted, however, that they had done absolutely nothing as a result of these fires, other than feeling sorry for the affected families.

Although the participants had heard that the number of fires in the city had increased, not all of them believed that fires and casualties had, in fact, risen. Some assumed that the number of fires was the same but that the media was reporting on more of them. Others seemed to feel that seven people out of a million did not seem like very many, considering how many people die in traffic accidents or street violence each year. However, the participants agreed that one death was one too many, especially when it could have been prevented.

*“One death that could have been prevented is too much, but seven is not a huge number. More kids are dying from DUI from one local high school alone.”*

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Respondents believed that the increase of fires and casualties was due to:

1. The particularly harsh winter forced some people to heat their homes with inappropriate equipment, such as their ovens or stoves, and to rely on space heaters that increase the risk of igniting nearby combustibles.
2. The city's rapid population increase, which resulted in a corresponding increase in fires and fire deaths. Participants pointed out that the "real" increase in population was much higher than officially reported due to the security situation in Mexico, which forced people to move to El Paso. These immigrants usually end up living with friends or relatives in crowded accommodations, increasing the risk of fires and casualties.

### **Current Preparations in Case of an Out-of-Control Fire--"The Plan"**

Although several participants had some sort of fire prevention measures in place, almost none had an actual home fire escape plan to follow. Only about eight participants from all the groups combined mentioned having an actual home fire escape plan, and most of them were the same participants who had the most preventive measures in place in their homes. About half of them were retired military personnel who had been trained for emergencies. Slightly more of these participants were in the English-speaking groups, and more than half were in the English- and Spanish-speaking general population groups.

Participants had a hard time distinguishing preventive measures from the home fire escape plan, which they saw as part of fire education and prevention in general. They did know, however, what should be included in a home fire escape plan because they named the following, in addition to the preventive measures already mentioned, when specifically asked:

- Having an escape route from every point in the house;
- Having an exit plan and a meeting point outside;
- Having information with family, including children and the elderly;
- Having a fire drill at home and practicing what needs to be done;
- Knowing who is in the house and accounting for everybody;

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- Making sure children know to get out first, instead of hiding or trying to look for others;
- Letting everyone know there is a fire;
- Knowing how to open the windows;
- Teaching children how to dial 911, especially if the adult at home is not responding; and
- Reminding everyone about “stop, drop, and roll” and to check for hot spots on doors with the back of the hand before opening them. (Editor’s note to reader: Stop, drop and roll is used if your clothing catches fire. When encountering smoke in a fire, you should get low and go under the smoke to get out safely.)

Most participants had never practiced a fire drill at home and had no idea how long it would take everyone to get out of the house in a fire. Participants’ estimations varied from 30 seconds to 20 minutes, with most estimates falling between 3 and 5 minutes. As expected, the general population group gave the lowest exit time, and seniors and single mothers gave the highest. This seems to make sense since the elderly may have physical disabilities or move more slowly than younger people and gathering children can slow down the escape process.

Participants made the following comments about estimated exit time:

*“It would take me longer than 5 minutes because my legs don’t respond very well.”*

–English-speaking senior

*“It would take me less than 1 minute to get out but a lot more than that to first realize what is happening.”*

–Spanish-speaking senior

*“Three to 4 minutes because there are so many kids in the house.”*

–English-speaking single mother

*“By myself, I can get out very quickly, but with my in-laws, who live with me, might as well count me dead.”*

–Spanish-speaking high-risk

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### Why Not Have a Plan?

For most participants, the main reasons they didn't have a home fire escape plan were similar to the reasons a fire in their homes was not a major worry:

- They have simply not thought about it;
- They have not experience a fire first-hand;
- They have a false sense of security;
- They believe it won't happen to them, even though they know it could; or
- They procrastinate.

*"It is one of those things like making your will: you know you have to do it, you know it is important, but you never actually get to it."*

Some participants in the Spanish-speaking groups mentioned that the idea of a complete home fire escape plan had never been brought to their attention. This did not mean that they didn't know what needed to be done, but the precautionary steps had never been presented to them as a complete package. Several participants emphasized that it was important to present a complete package and repeatedly stress its importance to create awareness.

*"There is not enough information about [the escape plan] out there, and then people feel uncomfortable talking about this."*

Several of the less acculturated Spanish-speaking participants, particularly those born and raised outside of the United States, mentioned that having a home fire escape plan was not part of their culture.

*"Our parents in Mexico never talked about a plan with us; there wasn't any plan."*

There appears to be no financial reason behind not having a plan since participants agreed that cost was not an issue for them. Several pointed out that the plan itself was not expensive to implement and that the cost of some of the preventive measures were relatively small, even free in the case of the smoke alarms installed by local firefighters. Nor did

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participants feel that physical ability was a barrier to having a plan. An overwhelming majority considered themselves physically capable of preparing and implementing a home fire escape plan in addition to taking some preventive measures. These participants added that, if they ever became physically disabled, they could ask a family member to develop an escape plan for them.

### **Who Has a Plan?**

The participants' cultural background and where they grew up played big roles in how aware they were of the importance of fire prevention and the importance of developing a home fire escape plan. The few non-Hispanic participants raised outside El Paso were more aware of the importance of having a plan, and most did have one.

Profession also played a role, particularly for those participants who worked in places such as military bases, large factories, hospitals, and schools where fire safety, including fire plans and drills, were emphasized. The stricter and more structured their jobs, the more conscious, knowledgeable, and adamant the participants were about fire safety. The two most knowledgeable and prepared participants were both retired military personnel. On the other hand, a female participant who had worked for many years at a Levi's factory said she felt "bad" that she hadn't been conscientious about fire escape planning in her home, as she "used to do it all the time when I worked for Levi's".

### **Whose Responsibility Is It, Anyway?**

Ultimately, the participants agreed that the full responsibility for having a plan or taking preventive measures was theirs and their spouses' or other adults in the household. As individuals, adults, homeowners, heads of households, parents, and caregivers, they took responsibility for coming up with, or lacking, a home fire escape plan.

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However, they also believed that they could get some help from:

- The media, which could run frequent public service announcements, some even showing graphic pictures of the consequences of not taking action, to create awareness. This would not be the same as reporting on an actual fire but, rather, presenting informative messages similar to the successful seat-belt campaigns.
- Local code and ordinance enforcers, since some people will never act unless they are forced to. Some participants believed that the city could try to enforce a smoke alarm installation or home fire escape plan ordinances, perhaps with the help of insurance companies, which could offer discounts to those who have a plan. One participant suggested that homeowners be required to take a fire prevention class before closing on a home.
- Schools. All the participants who went to school in the United States remembered Smokey Bear and NFPA's "Stop, Drop, and Roll" program and thought that schools were no longer placing enough emphasis on fire prevention. These participants believed that schools should provide fire safety information, in addition to having the routine fire drills.
- The fire department, since they have fire safety knowledge and training, as well as statistics and resources, to emphasize home fire escape planning.
- Community outreach programs. Participants suggested that the city, the fire department, and other agencies participate in a combined effort to make an impact as they did to raise awareness of the possible flu epidemic.

### **The Family Reaction to the Plan**

Half of the participants said that if they were to gather their families and talk about a home fire escape plan, they would embrace it and take it seriously:

*"They will like it; it will make them feel safe."*

*"My kids would be excited."*

*"My husband would think is great, since it is for the benefit of our daughter."*

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However, the other half said they would be met with hesitation:

*“My wife would be afraid; she doesn’t like to think about those things.”*

*“It would get the same reaction as when I want to talk about purchasing our funeral package.”*

Some even said they were sure their families would make fun of them and think they were crazy, making comments such as:

*“Don’t worry about it; it’s not going to happen to you.”*

*“C’mon, mom, are you really going to start talking about fires? You are going to bring us bad luck.”*

Despite the possible negative reactions, all participants said they would feel comfortable talking about a home fire escape plan with their families. It would make them feel good and give them a sense of pride and satisfaction. Participants added that being firm and not giving up on the escape plan were important because hesitant family members would eventually understand the importance of the message, feel safer, and have the information fresh in their minds should they ever have to use it.

One participant noted that not overdoing it or exaggerating the risk was important because you run the risk of being ignored. Another participant said being prepared and well-informed before having a planning meeting was crucial.

### **The Role of the Fire Department**

Participants agreed that the fire department’s main role was to put out fires in a timely manner and rescue victims, but most also believed that firefighters play a vital role in educating the public about fire prevention. Some mentioned that firefighters should regularly visit and inspect homes as they do businesses. Some added that such a service was already available for those who called their local fire department and asked for it.

*“It is their responsibility to inform us, but it is our responsibility to search for that information.”*

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Participants suggested that firefighters should attend neighborhood meetings and other community events, as police officers do, to tell the public about fire prevention and home fire escape plans. However, most focus group participants stated that they did not belong to a neighborhood association and that they would not join one.

### **Recent Messages Regarding Fire Safety in the News**

We asked participants if they could recall any recent messages about fire safety. A handful knew about the fire department's free smoke alarm installation campaign and recalled hearing about it on the news after reports of fires. Specifically, participants mentioned Channel 14 (KFOX). Some also said they learned about the free alarm installation from the local newspaper.

Some participants noted that when NBC, ABC, and Univision reported a fire, they usually followed it with a list of fire prevention tips. One Spanish-speaking participant also mentioned hearing something about fire prevention on Univision when it reported on a snow storm in El Paso. Spanish-speaking participants noted that Mexican radio and television present fire awareness messages much more frequently than the U.S. media and that these messages increase in frequency in November, before the holiday season.

Some parents of children in elementary school said that they received fire safety information from their children's schools. One participant mentioned having seen fire prevention messages in her electric bill.

### **El Paso Fire Department Initiatives**

We presented participants with seven different EPFD community initiatives that the department is considering implementing and asked what they thought of them.

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1. Smoke Alarm Installation Program

Firefighters from local fire stations go door to door in neighborhoods, testing smoke alarms and making sure there are enough alarms. They install alarms when needed. They share fire safety prevention and escape information with the residents.

In principle, most participants agreed that this seemed like a great idea, but they agreed that, realistically, it would be hard to deliver on the promise of visiting every single household in the city. Participants worried about the financial burden and the toll the initiative would take on the fire department's budget, as well as the possible tax implications.

Some participants added that they thought this initiative catered to the public too much and insisted that, at some point, people should take responsibility for their own safety. They noted that such an initiative already existed and that people only had to call their local fire department and ask for it.

An additional drawback could be some residents' hesitation to open their doors or let firefighters inside, either because it is an inconvenient time or because they don't trust strangers. They said impostors could pass for fire department volunteers. Spanish-speaking participants said some residents might not open their doors because they were hiding something illegal, such as drugs or illegal aliens, or because some men would not want their wives to let a man in the house.

If this program were implemented, participants suggested that the media let the public know in advance of the initiative and home visits, as was done during the recent census. Awareness of the initiative might be enough to make people install smoke alarms themselves.

2. Home Safety Surveys

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Firefighters conduct home safety surveys to help improve safety conditions in the home. They tell residents what they can do to prevent fires and recommend safe practices. Firefighters will help residents make and practice a home fire escape plan. For example, firefighters may point out a blocked exit or combustibles too close to heating equipment.

This initiative is similar to the smoke alarm initiative, although participants considered it slightly more intrusive. This proposal also sounded good in theory, but participants saw the same problems they saw with the smoke alarm initiative. In addition, one participant worried about the possibility of receiving some sort of fine if her house was not in compliance. Others said they would feel embarrassed if their mistakes were pointed out to them.

Focus group participants also mentioned they would be hesitant to let people into their home around dinner time and would not let people into their homes if their homes were not clean or if they were messy. Some participants noted that the management of some apartment complexes already had such an inspection in place, while others added that, in the rest of the homes, fire safety measures should be the homeowner's or renter's responsibility.

If implemented, participants would like advance notice of the initiative and details of the home visits via the media.

### **3. Security Bar Retrofit Program**

The EPFD works with local iron workers to retrofit bars on windows of sleeping areas to ensure they have a quick release device.

Some participants liked this initiative, especially when thinking of homes built in the '70s that don't have quick release systems. However, most either did not have bars on their windows or they had already adapted them with the new system. Some had simply taken off the locks so that the windows could be opened.

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There were some doubts and questions about who would be responsible for the cost of this initiative. Some people said that the homeowner should be responsible for paying, while others said that those who really needed the quick release systems could probably not afford them.

As with the previous initiatives, some participants were adamant that these measures should be the responsibility of the homeowner.

#### **4. Outreach to Preschools and High Schools**

Firefighters go into schools to teach children key fire safety behaviors. Teachers are also trained to teach the *Learn Not to Burn® Program* in English or Spanish. High school students would receive Community Emergency Response Team training. Young people from 14 to 20 could experience the fire service as fire explorers.

Participants commented that children absorb information like a sponge and pointed out the importance of starting the message and the mind set at an early age. Participants also mentioned that preschools already have several programs, such as Fire Prevention Week, in place in addition to regular fire drills. The challenge here is to make sure that parents pay attention to the messages their children bring from school and reinforce them at home by not dismissing them when they try to share information.

An appealing part of this initiative was the hands-on involvement of teenagers for their safety and possibly as training for a future career in the fire service. At the least, the program would allow teenagers to obtain volunteer hours, which schools often require for graduation. Some participants pointed out that the teenage years represent a large gap in information between the messages children learn in elementary school and the measures they have to implement in adulthood. This initiative would close that gap, and most participants saw it as a win-win situation, even if only a small percentage of the teenagers participated.

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**5. Outreach to People in the Workplace**

Fire safety educators teach people fire safety in the workplace and safety at home to people at work. Instruction includes ways to prevent fires at work and at home, as well as fire drills at work and at home.

This initiative was only shown to the first three English-speaking groups before NFPA staff and the fire department decided to delete it. Most participants did not find it relevant, the EPFD would have too little control over it, and it would be difficult to implement during working hours. Participants who did comment on this initiative noted that many big employers already have such fire prevention programs in place.

**6. Outreach to People Through Neighborhood Associations**

Fire department outreach staff members give presentations at neighborhood association meetings, community centers, senior centers, and other group meetings to teach attendees the basics of fire prevention, home fire escape planning, and smoke alarm installation and maintenance. The fire department schedules each presentation, and neighborhoods that are at highest risk take priority.

In El Paso, there are very few neighborhood associations as we know them in other parts of Texas. There are, however, other community meetings, such as neighborhood watches, in addition to community centers. A participant who worked at a hospital thought it was a great idea and suggested that the fire department join one of the hospital's health fairs because a lot of people gather at those events.

This initiative sounded good to some participants because it was economically feasible and realistic, but very few had actually participated in a community event. If their experiences are any indication of the kind of interest generated, the fire department must take care to combine its presentations with events that appeal to, and attract, lots of people.

**7. Teaching Fire Safety to Older Adults**

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Firefighters teach older adults fire safety at their gathering places: senior centers, churches, recreation departments, nutrition centers, etc. Home visiting organization workers are taught fire safety and they share this information with older adults when they visit them in their homes.

Most participants agreed that this initiative would be a good way to reach home-bound people. They felt it was more realistic than trying to reach every individual household and that, although it covers a smaller part of the community, it's probably the part that needs the most help.

Participants suggested that trained volunteers do this work, since firefighters need to be ready at the station in case of a fire.

### **Preferred Initiatives**

Of the seven initiatives presented, the most popular were outreach to schools and to older adults and home visits for smoke alarm installation or a home safety survey.

### **Suggestions for Reaching Out**

When we asked participants what they thought was the best way to reach the public, they suggested:

- Television, particularly local news and commercials;
- Radio;
- Newspapers;
- Flyers in the door or through the mail; and
- Public service announcements.

Several participants mentioned that, to get the message across and create awareness, flooding the media in every possible way was necessary. Participants also commented on the

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importance of creating a catchy slogan or tune for the campaign that was easy to remember and identify with the campaign, then flooding the media with it.

Participants felt that any home escape planning initiative must instill a sense of personal responsibility toward fire safety, fire prevention, and home fire escape planning in El Paso residents.

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**APPENDIX**

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**DISCUSSION GUIDE  
NFPA/EPFD Exploratory Focus Groups  
March 2 and 3, 2011**

**I. INTRODUCTION** **5 MINUTES. (5 min)**

- Welcome participants
- Explain general purpose of the meeting and introduce the goals of the session
- Explain the presence and purpose of recording equipment
- Explain that we are not selling anything but that we want to hear participant feedback
- Outline general guidelines:
  1. Independent
  2. All opinions are valid
  3. There are no right or wrong answers
  4. Please speak up so you can be heard
  5. Talk one at a time and respect others
  6. All information is confidential

**II. WARM UP** **10 MINUTES. (15 min)**

Today we are going to be talking about issues that affect us all as a community. To get our conversation started, let's go around the table and please tell me:

- Your name
- What do you do for a living
- If you are married or single, if you have kids
- What do you think is your biggest responsibility toward yourself, your family, or others who live with you or around you?

**III. ATTITUDES AND AWARENESS** **15 MINUTES. (30 min)**

Thinking about the future for a moment, what issues worry you the most when it comes to the future?

- Does having an emergency come to mind? What kind of emergency?
- Does a having a fire in your home come to mind? Why? Why not?
- Have any of you been faced with a home fire in the past? If so, how did you react?
- Do you know anyone else who had a home fire before? What does that make you feel?
- Do you think that could happen to you?
- Do you think you will face an out-of-control home fire situation in your lifetime? Why? Why not?
- When you think of an out-of-control fire situation what goes through your mind?
- What are your biggest concerns when you think of an out-of-control fire in the home?

Let's talk about fire prevention...

- What do you think about when you hear "fire prevention"?
- What does it mean?
- Where did you learn about it, if at all?

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**IV. CURRENT PREPARATIONS**

**15 MINUTES. (45 min)**

Let's talk about being prepared for an out-of-control fire if it should occur in your home.

- As of today, what have you taken steps to be prepared for an out of control fire in your home?
  - What steps did you take? When did you take those steps?
  - What made you take those steps?
  - Were you the lead person in organizing those steps?
  - What do you call these steps and preparation? What is it?
  - Could you say you have a plan in place?
  - Who knows about your plan? Have you shared it with your family? How did they react to it?
  
- What about those of us that have not taken any steps...
  - Have you ever thought about taking steps to be prepared in case of an out-of-control fire in your home?
  - When was the last time you thought about taking steps?
  - What prompted you to think about it?
  - Why do you think you did not follow through?
  - If you were to have a plan, what do you think your family's reaction would be?
  
- What goes into a "plan/fire education"?
- What is/was the most difficult or challenging part of fire prevention/escape plan?
  - Cost? Time? Finding out information on what to do? Physical impediment?
- How would you practice the plan?
- In your particular situation, who should be responsible for putting a fire emergency prevention plan together?

**V. SMOKE ALARMS**

**10 MINUTES. (55 min)**

Let's talk about smoke alarms.

- Do you have a smoke alarm in your residence?
- Did you install it yourself?
- Are smoke alarms necessary?
- Are smoke alarms required?
- Who is responsible for installing smoke detectors? Why?
  - Anyone else responsible for that?
  - Landlord? Family member? City? Fire Department?

**VI. CURRENT FIRE EVENTS**

**15 MINUTES. (1:10 hr)**

- Have you heard anything about fires in El Paso recently?
  - What did you hear?
  - Where did you hear about it?

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- Do fatal fires happen in El Paso? By that I mean a fire situation in which someone unfortunately lost his or her life?
  - Can you recall hearing anything about it?
  - When was it? How did you learn about it?

**AFTER PROBING FOR UNAIDED RECALL**

There has been a dramatic increase in -home fire deaths in El Paso in the past year. In 2010 there were 10 fire deaths. In the first two months of 2011 there were seven fire deaths.

- Have you heard or read anything about these incidents?
- How did that make you feel?
- Did you do anything as a direct consequence of hearing about it?
- Have any family members or friends in other households reacted to these fires by doing something different?
- Have you seen any messages regarding fire safety and fire emergency prevention?
- What were those messages? Where did you see them?
- Who sponsored those messages?
- Did you act upon those messages?
- Where do you expect to see messages about fire prevention? TV? Radio? Web?

**VII. BEHAVIORAL CHANGES**

**10 MINUTES. (1:20 hr)**

I want you to take a few minutes to think about a situation in your life in which you had to make a change, a life altering change; and I want you to think about what motivated you to make that change.

For instance, you might notice that your good friend over the course of a few months loses 10 pounds, and it's noticeable. When you ask your friend about the weight loss, the friend tells you that the doctor told the friend he had high blood sugar and if he didn't lose weight he might become diabetic, so he decided to lose weight. In this case, the risk of becoming diabetic motivated him.

Give me some examples of what has motivated you to make a change in your life.

- What made you make the change?
- Who or what were you thinking about?
- Was it because of a message or program you received?
- What was the most difficult challenge about making the change?
- How long or how many times did you try before succeeding?
- What do you think needs to happen for you to take steps towards fire prevention?

**VIII. EPFD INITIATIVES**

**20 MINUTES. (1:40 hr)**

Let's talk about the El Paso Fire Department...

- In your experience and understanding, what do you think the role of the El Paso Fire Department is in our community?
- What do you think when you think of the EPFD?

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- What words come to mind?
- How would you define their work?
- What are your expectations of the EPFD?
- What are their duties?
  - Is planning and prevention one of them? Why?
  - How important is it?
- What can the El Paso Fire Department do to help you be ready for fire emergencies?

The El Paso Fire Department is implementing and considering implementing a number of fire safety and prevention education initiatives in our communities. I would like to share them with you and get your thoughts...

PRESENT EACH IDEA INDIVIDUALLY, PREFERABLY IN AN 8X10 SHEET. READ OUTLOUD AND DISCUSS ACCORDINGLY

- What do you think about this idea?
- Is this something in which you would be interested in participating? Why? Why not?
- Is this something you think would be easy to implement for you? Why? Why not?
- Is this something that would make you think of fire prevention? Why? Why not?
- What steps would you take from this initiative?
- Should the EPFD be involved in this type of initiative?

**IX. CLOSING**

**5 MINUTES. (1:45 hr)**

That is everything we have for you. We hope you enjoyed our session. But before we end, is there anything else you would like to say about any of the materials or information we discussed today?

**THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO JOIN US TODAY. YOUR INSIGHTS HAVE BEEN VERY VALUABLE!**