



Ryan: Hello, this is Ryan Smith, with Fire Smarts, LLC, and you are listening to an interview with Steve Muncy, President of the American Fire Sprinkler Association (AFSA). Steve has an extensive career in the fire sprinkler industry. In 1988 he became the Executive Vice President of the American Fire Sprinkler Association where he served for three years before becoming AFSA's President in 1991. In his career, Steve served for six years as the Chairman of the Residential Fire Safety Institute, six years on the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Board of Directors, and was a founding member of the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition, where he currently serves as an active board member. In 2002 Steve Muncy was named Person of the Year by Fire Protection Contractor Magazine for his significant service, leadership, and advocacy to the fire protection industry.

Thank you so much for calling in and participating in this recorded telephone interview.

Steve: No problem.

Ryan: I've really been looking forward to this. I've been definitely wanting to understand more about your career and your perspective in the industry and also specifically your involvement with the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition.

Steve: Sure, go ahead.

Ryan: Tell me a little bit about how you got started in the industry. I'd love to just understand your journey from the very beginning all the way to the current positions that you hold in the industry.

Steve: Sure. Out of college, I worked for about six years for a U.S. Congressman, and then left there to go to work in government affairs for an oil field trade association... and spent about eight years there, and went to work for the home building industry in the Dallas area, in a trade association representing home builders. Spent about four years there, and then from there, I came over to the American Fire Sprinkler Association. Served three years as Executive Vice President and then upon the retirement of Frank Riseden, I was named President of the association, and been here ever since.

Ryan: Well, that's a pretty extensive background. You've got some variety there, coming from both the home builders' background, and then also now on the fire sprinkler side. What initially attracted you to work in the fire industry, coming from the home builders' side of the industry?

Steve: Frankly, at the time I left the home building industry, the homebuilding association, they were in a major recession, and I liked the prospect of going to work for an organization that was national in scope – my previous association had been national in scope, also, and I liked working with a national organization – and I particularly liked



working for one that had the prospect of promoting a product that saved lives and property. And it's not always that you can say that what you do ultimately can result in that. That was a big incentive to it.

Ryan: Absolutely. I can relate to that. That was one of the big attractions for me with the industry, to be able to say I'm putting my time and energy into something that's protecting lives and property and having a real influence in the public.

Steve: Absolutely.

Ryan: Now, I know you're probably hesitant to toot your own horn, but I was curious: What accomplishments in your career and the time that you've served stand out to you, that you are most proud of?

Steve: Well, I'm really proud, frankly, of the growth that AFSA has had over the last years, the last twenty years. We've not only grown in membership, but we have expanded greatly in services. I think we bring an awful lot to the table now, to the fire sprinkler community. We have greatly expanded our involvement in technical services, in providing technical services to the industry.

You know, AFSA was a very young association when I first came here, and we had some really enlightened people, I think, who formed the organization. But frankly I think that the original purpose of the AFSA was training-oriented, and specifically apprenticeship training, providing training for open shop contractors, and their employees. And that's still a very important function of ours and still gets an awful lot of time and effort. But beyond that, we've really expanded into, as I said, the technical services area, providing technical services to our members. We provide designer training, we provide online training. We have the largest convention and trade show specific to the fire sprinkler industry, probably in the world. We don't know of any that are larger than ours. We now have over a thousand contractor members, hundreds of associate members. So I'm real proud of the growth that this organization has had, and the impact that it's having on the fire sprinkler industry. The association coming from a very limited background into expanding services across the board.

I was proud to serve as chairman of the Residential Fire Safety Institute for two years, which used to be called Operation Life Safety. Its primary focus is working with the fire service in promoting sprinklers and smoke alarms. I was proud to do that.

I'm very proud to have been a founding member – one of the original organizing members – of Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition.

[In] 2002 I was selected as the Fire Protection Contractor magazine's Person of the Year, which I was very pleased by, and I've served on the board of NFPA for six years, and I'm



proud of my involvement there and the contributions I've been able to make to that organization. That probably pretty well sums it up.

Ryan: Absolutely. You've definitely served in a variety of capacities with most of the major organizations in the industry. I was curious: You started off by talking about the growth of AFSA. What would you [attribute] to, probably the most, to the success you've had in growing your membership.

Steve: I think if you build a better mousetrap, people are going to recognize that. We've tried really hard to focus on what kinds of services the industry needs, and that will draw members. We had, in a sense, a unique focus, in that, one, we recognized that the open shop segment of the fire sprinkler industry needs training. And they couldn't get training under the union agreements before the formation of AFSA. The union wouldn't allow open shop fitters to be trained. So that was the impetus for the formation of AFSA. In those days – over 25 years ago – the open shop segment of the industry was pretty small. It was considerably less than 50%. Today, I think we're estimating it's like about 85 % of the sprinkler installations are done by open shop contractors. So you've had this growth in the kinds of contractors that AFSA was specifically formed to serve. That helped in the – you know, it's got to have a two way street – we're providing services that they couldn't get elsewhere that helps companies grow, helps them be more efficient in what they're doing - plus the evolution of the fire sprinkler industry. I mean, we're putting in more heads today than ever before, so that growth is going to be able to support the kinds of activities that helps the association and build on that and offer other services.

Ryan: Excellent. So you've seen a shift in the industry towards the open shop contractor, along with just the increase in demand for the services.

Steve: One other thing I do want to point out. AFSA is a contractors' association. It's in our bylaws that we were formed for the purpose of supporting contractor activities. Now, we've got a lot of associate members that are very important to AFSA and very important to what we do, and contribute very much to this organization, and we couldn't be a good organization without them. They're very important to us also. We do have a number of union members, too. They typically join AFSA for a different reason than some of the open shop contractors would join. Open shop contractors may be coming in being driven really by some of the training opportunities. The union contractors typically come in either because of technical services that we can offer, or they benefit from the online seminars and programs that we have, the annual convention, things like that. The union contractor base in AFSA is small. But we definitely have a union base. We're not strictly limited to open shop contractors.

Ryan: Got it. So it's important to understand that you're servicing all contractors.

Steve: Yes, with a particular focus on open shop, merit shop contractors.



Ryan: Excellent. A lot of the questions I was hoping to ask you today were focused on the home fire protection industry and specifically your involvement with the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition. But while we're talking about AFSA, if somebody is listening to this interview – a contractor, say – and they're interested in taking advantage of some of the services and benefits offered by AFSA, what would you say to them as the reason why they should join the organization and participate?

Steve: Any contractor who looks at the base of their industry today is going to understand that it has been driven by increased emphasis on awareness of fire sprinklers and codes. And that 'codes' word – I think a lot of contractors just assume, 'Oh, by golly, the codes just morphed into requirements for fire sprinklers in different kinds of occupancies.' That just is not the case. AFSA has worked very hard, along with other organizations, to try to increase the number of requirements and offer trade-offs and encouragements to get sprinklers in the building codes. We continue to do that. So contractors – their bottom line economics, based on getting systems installed, is being driven by AFSA and other organizations like NFPA that promote sprinklers also. That's one reason. We're benefiting the growth of the industry and they're going to benefit from that.

Secondly, is the broad range of educational opportunities we've got. Anybody in the fire sprinkler industry can easily find the time and the kinds of programs that they need for their company. AFSA offers a wide variety of them online, and we have a fire sprinkler e-campus that they can take courses by computer, we have telephone virtual seminars where they can participate six or eight times a year in learning some of the latest stuff that's going on in the industry. So the learning opportunities are there, too.

Technical services. We provide informal technical interpretations for members. We don't do it for non-members; just for members. We've got members who tell us that one single informal interpretation has saved them enough money to buy multiple years of membership at AFSA. So there's some real – AFSA is a good investment for contractors, because they're going to be getting back a lot for their money.

Ryan: I can really appreciate your comments there, because you mention – while AFSA is an excellent resource for the contractor to develop their own business through training and the other technical resources available, you also focused on the importance of joining AFSA for the development of the industry as a whole, and a lot of the code development work that the association is involved with. I definitely second that. It's important that contractors not only focus on their own business, but also on the industry as a whole, because a rising tide raises all ships.

Steve: Absolutely.

Ryan: I'm very curious: When you look at the fire industry - with the several decades that you've been involved - you've probably seen a tremendous shift and evolution, and I



would enjoy hearing your perspective in as much detail as you can provide, on some of the significant changes that have happened over the last several decades to bring us to where we're at today.

Steve: Sure. Well, first and foremost it's going to be the growth of requirement of sprinklers in the building codes. I mean, it's much more – much wider requirements for sprinklers than it used to be. There's also a lot more heads that can meet specific applications, so there's been a big growth there. In the last twenty years – over twenty years, actually – there's been an increasing number of – an increasing interest in the residential. Now, at first residential was defined as 13R, but of course more and more it's defined as 13D, also. I think now what we're seeing – probably the most significant growth in the industry in terms of percentage of growth, is single family residential. That doesn't mean it's a huge part of the market yet. But it's an area of significant growth.

You know, you just look at the last twenty years or so, and I think we've probably more than doubled the number of heads installed in the last twenty years, from what they were twenty years ago. So there's been an awful lot of growth, and that growth has been driven not just by new buildings, but it's been driven by changes in code, it's been driven by retrofit laws, and it's been driven by more and more residential requirements. So it's done a lot of growing.

One of the things - there's a lot of talk these days [about] the economy, and I'm not gonna deny that the economy - and particularly in the construction industry - is becoming more of a challenge. But the built-in code requirements that have been developed over the last twenty years, have made for the fire sprinkler industry the peaks and valleys not quite so severe, particularly the valleys. When they're not building new buildings, there's still maintenance work and rework, there are sometimes retrofit laws taking place... so that there is still activity going on. Perhaps not quite at the fever pitch, but more than there has in the past. So that's a good thing, that the valleys are not quite so deep, and that makes the overall economics just a whole lot better for contractors and for the people who need the protection.

Ryan: Excellent. So you've seen an increase in the code requirements that has not only increased the demand for the services, but has also reduced the volatility through the years.

Steve: Absolutely.

Ryan: What are some of the challenges or obstacles that you either ran into in the past or that you're still currently running into in your efforts to make changes in the fire protection industry?

Steve: There's a few. On the residential side, we still struggle with the reluctance of home builders who look at the past and don't really particularly see fire sprinklers as a



positive change, and I think they have a feeling that it's coming, but there's still this very big reluctance on their part and hopefully we'll be close within a few years and they'll finally embrace the concept. You know, if you go back and look at history, it's just amazing how hard the homebuilding industry fought against installation of electrical systems in homes. (laughter) Probably for the same reasons that they're opposing fire sprinklers today. We're seeing a softening there, but it's still a challenge in terms of the single family residential, and actually even in multi-family. Home and apartment builders have really fought the concept of 3+ floors in residential sprinklers, too.

Allow me to elaborate a little bit on the residential side. Because the economy has been so robust on the commercial side, a lot of contractors – long-standing fire sprinkler contractors – have not really gotten into the single-family residential side yet. And it makes sense, because if you've got all the business you can do, doing probably more lucrative commercial work, you're not going to turn those bidders loose to do jobs in which the profit margin is lower and requires a greater volume to make up the profit. And so the challenge for the growth on the residential side is, where are we going to get the contractors who are going to be willing to invest in that side of it? I think what we're going to see, ultimately, is a lot of new companies start up that are just residential companies. We're also going to see existing companies that do a lot of commercial work probably start separate divisions or separate independent companies to address that market. Plus the fitters – the training and the fitters – it's very different between those two different kinds of installations.

Manpower is a real issue in this industry, and the industry has grown rapidly. I think contractors are looking for not just designers, layout technicians, estimators – those are very much in demand – but the fitters – where do you get the people to install the systems once they're laid out and ready to be installed? It's been a real challenge.

Exacerbating that problem has been an increasing number of efforts to license sprinkler fitters. Now the problem with fitter licensing is that it tends to constrict the number of people who are accepted to go out and do that kind of work. So we've got a growing industry, we've got a growing demand for fitters, a growing demand for training and people who are in the training process, and then we've got on the other side states that are looking at the issues of licensing fitters, and that reduces the capability of a lot of contractors to actually meet contracts that they've got on the books. That's a huge challenge. And it's a particular challenge because I think a lot of authorities having jurisdiction, a lot of states, go into this with a very pure motive: they want to make sure that the people installing fire sprinkler systems are trained and knowledgeable and know what they're doing. But unfortunately the state doesn't enforce any of that. What the state enforces - the state wants to make sure that the contractor installed the system correctly. They approve the contractor's work – not necessarily the state, but the local jurisdiction approves the contractor's work – but the contractor's responsible for the building owner, for all the warranty work - so it's the contractor who ultimately bears all of this responsibility. It's not the fitter. And if a fitter does a bad job, it'll ultimately



affect the contractor, and either the contractor doesn't get a job accepted, or he's got to go back and redo - based on warranty work - expensive repairs, so the contractor ought to have trained fitters, too. But when you require a fitter to have a license and go through the effort to take a test, and say that it's okay - you've got to have so many licensed fitters on each job or a job site, then you start constraining the number of people who can actually get that work done. So on the one hand, you've got the fire service and AHJ's and fire marshals and fire chiefs pushing for greater sprinkler requirements, and that's wonderful. But then they come up with the idea of licensing the fitters, and they can't meet the demand - the hit is meeting the demand that they're creating, on the other hand. That's a huge issue.

Another issue, frankly, that I hope one of these days we'll get close to addressing is that the retrofit market - there's lots of buildings in this country that need to be addressed through retrofit. Had The Station nightclub been retrofitted with fire sprinklers, a hundred lives would have been saved. But the owners of The Station nightclub probably believed that it was too expensive to put the fire sprinklers in there. Well, on your average building, commercial installation, a sprinkler system, if it's installed as a retrofit, the depreciation period, I believe, is 39 years. There's no real payback in that. Now, AFSA and NFPA and NFSA and some other organizations are working together to promote legislation called the Fire Sprinkler Incentive Act that would reduce that 39-year depreciation period back down to a five-year period. And in fact that's really front-loaded, so say on a \$250,000 job, \$125,000 of it will be on the first couple of years. But that serves as a better incentive to get sprinkler retrofits in there. But the cost of the system and the depreciation schedule - while it's not sexy to talk to the community about depreciation schedules, it is a problem for addressing the issue of retrofits, because the expense is something that we need to find a way to address.

I think that's probably the biggest pressing issues and challenges.

Ryan: You just hit on a number of key points. On the depreciation issue, you're taking a very practical approach, saying it's not just about the education piece, which is important to raise public awareness, but it's also getting down to the nuts and bolts on the finance side, to say, okay, how do we incent the building owner to perform the retrofit or the installation, and make it more worth their while so they're more likely to do that.

Steve: Absolutely. And it also - looking at it practically, let's say a building owner even then is hesitant to do that, but if local jurisdiction, let's say, is pushing a local ordinance of some kind, and the city council is willing to go on the line, and the fire chief and the fire marshal is willing to go on the line and say this is a good idea to do this, and then people come in saying, 'It takes me thirty-nine years to depreciate this system. It's too expensive.' Well they can point to it and say, 'Aha, BUT - there's this approach that you can take which reduces the depreciation, saves you on taxes, helps you pay for that system, a whole lot faster.' Who benefits? The building owner benefits, the community benefits. Lives are saved. And frankly it makes no sense not to shorten that depreciation



period considerably.

Ryan: Absolutely. One of the other things you mentioned that's just fascinating is you're talking about a growing industry with an already somewhat scarce labor pool, and you're talking about the challenges with fitter licensing and further restricting that labor pool. And then on top of that, you were talking about the future opportunities on the residential side that could lead to even more companies or contractor expansion to meet the demand for residential services. What do you see – just to put this in context – on the residential side, what do you anticipate as an increase in demand? Do you have any way to quantify that?

Steve: No, not really, because the scale of it is such that – let's say, for example, that this international residential code – the requirement for residential sprinklers - is put into the international residential code this year. In September, it's voted in for the next cycle. Now you've got a building code – a residential code - that says, 'Thou shalt put fire sprinklers in all single family homes.' Well, that's not going to be universally adopted right away by every community across the country. In some local areas homebuilders are going to fight to have that removed, and they may be successful in some, but even more likely is the fact that there's going to be delays, inevitable delays in adopting the most current building code. Some local jurisdictions are using building codes that are 10-12-14 years old. Today. So what I'm trying to say is that even though demand may be there, and requirements may be there, there's going to be a long lead time as this gets integrated into the process. It's not going to be one day we don't have requirements, and then the next day we do and they're all going to be built. So it's going to be hard to determine how those communities react and when they update their building codes to get those new requirements in there. That's a real difficult equation. (both laugh)

I think what we're going to see – oddly, I think that a lot of people, their initial thought was, you know, homebuilders are going to go fight on the local level and have this removed from the building code. Well, cities may be reluctant to do that because the risk managers for the cities are going to be concerned about taking stuff out of the building code and the potential liability issues they may face. So the bigger issue may be the delay in getting building codes updated and newer building codes adopted.

That'll take a few years. That'll take a while, probably more than just a few years. But in that length of time, the chart showing the increase in number of residential installations is going to be going up and up and up and up – and responding to that is going to be the number of companies that are responding to that demand, and the number of employees they have to gather and train and get to work. If every community were to adopt residential fire sprinkler ordinances tomorrow, and next week every new house that's started is going to have to have a new fire sprinkler system, there's not enough contractors in the country to meet that demand. But that's not going to happen. This is going to be a process that takes place over a number of years. And so we're going to see the cycle of fire sprinklers going up and up and up, not vertically, but at a pretty good



incline. And it's just going to happen. It also means that, you know, people that are involved in fire sprinklers, that this is a growing market, that there's different ways to get involved in the installation of fire sprinklers. It's a lot more secure market – those shallow valleys may become even more shallow in a bad economic environment.

Ryan: Absolutely. So you're seeing basically a natural built-in phase-in process for this. Even after international residential code itself may be changed, there's a natural phase-in process as the codes get adopted at the local level, which allows for some ramp-up time for the industry to meet the demand those code changes could bring.

Steve: Yes. Absolutely. You know, I think we know it's coming. Whether the code changes this year – which I'm very optimistic about – or future years, we know it's coming. And so the future is – no matter how far you look down the road, the future is extremely bright. Even if it weren't adopted this time – and I think it will be, and I sure hope it is this time – but even if it's not adopted this time, the growing number of residential installations is very healthy. And so, we're on that road now, that road of incorporating and building the number of contractors and people who are going to be involved in residential installations. That's already going on. It'll accelerate once the IRC adopts that, but it won't be an overnight thing.

Ryan: I see. What role does AFSA play in helping to prepare the industry for that demand? Do they take an active role in that or do they pretty much let supply and demand run its course?

Steve: I guess it depends on how you define “role.” We've looked at the residential market as something that is a big piece of the fire sprinkler industry. The number of heads that are going to be sold and installed... so we look at it in terms of what needs to be done to address this emerging market.

One, we want to promote it. We want to promote the concept. We want people to understand the reality of residential fire sprinklers. There's an educational process that needs to go on here. An educational process that relieves the fears that many people have. They think all the heads are going to go off at the same time, they're afraid they're going to have leaks from their fire sprinkler systems, it's going to have water damage and mold... you know, they don't worry about that from their toilets, and they don't worry about that from their hot water heaters, but they worry about that with their fire sprinkler systems! So there's an educational process here that needs to be done. Now, we decided some years ago that that needed to be a common industry message. And so that was what was responsible for the birth of the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition. AFSA doesn't independently any longer talk about and promote the residential market as an individual organization. We do that through the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition. Because that gives us a combined message, a combined – it allows us to plot a strategy together about what groups we're trying to reach. Everybody's using the same materials, everybody's using the same strategy. It allows us to have a growth that is planned and directed very



efficiently.

Beyond that, there's gonna be training necessary. There's going to need to be information on the market itself, the business side of it. And we're addressing that. Every convention AFSA had the last five or six years we have a track of seminars on the residential market, the emerging residential market. We do online telephone seminars talking about residential several times a year. We've got - through our affiliate - the Center for Life Safety Education - we've had some online training programs, inexpensive training programs on the residential market. We have just completed - and it will soon be available for sale - I won't call it an apprentice book, but a training book, training and correspondence book for the residential sprinkler fitter, because it's a different market than your - you know, a four-year apprenticeship program takes a fitter through all kinds of systems, primarily for commercial applications. But residential is not that intensive, and so we've got a separate, single volume training book coming out on training residential sprinkler fitters.

So we're trying to approach the training side of it big, too. And we're making some progress there.

Ryan: Just a couple of follow-up questions on what you said. You've got a manual coming out that's specific towards the fitting of residential systems. Do you envision that as a potential way to help the labor shortage in the industry as the demand for the services increases, by having people specifically specialize in only residential?

Steve: Training materials were really developed to address two different audiences. One is those companies that form that are only doing residential work. That's all they do. But they need to train their employees on how to do that residential work. The second application is that there are plumbers, plumbing companies, who are now doing residential work. Those people have to be trained to do it right. Now AFSA has long had a policy that if a company trains their people in the proper installation practices, pays the insurance that's required for their trade, the contractor is licensed if a contractor's license is required, and they follow the accepted NFPA standards for the installation of 13D systems. If they do all of those things, we don't care if the name outside is Joe's Plumbing or Joe's Fire Sprinkler Contractors. Because in our book, they're both fire sprinkler contractors. And if you look through our membership manual - our membership directory - or check our online information, we have a number of companies that have been members for years that are plumbing companies, that are doing both plumbing and residential fire sprinkler systems - and some even commercial fire sprinkler systems. The concern is not those people. The concern is not the people that are training, that are doing everything right, right now. The concern is that if there's a growth in this market that some plumbers may think plastic pipe is white, or plastic pipe is orange, it's all the same to me and it all ought to be installed the same way. Well, that's not the case. They're different products. There's a thing called hydraulics that needs to be applied in the application of sprinkler systems and the layout of sprinkler



systems. There's a lot more to it than simply putting two pieces of plastic pipe - if plastic pipe is what's used - together. So this book is designed also to be able to be used by companies that are looking at expanding into the residential sprinkler market but who want to train their people to do that. And so that's a part of the market that's got to be trained. Somebody's got to train those people. And hopefully AFSA will play a big role in that.

Ryan: It's very fascinating what you're saying, because earlier you mentioned that the residential market – you can envision new companies forming and new divisions of current companies forming to specifically focus on residential, so there could be a tremendous opportunity there for the plumbing community that would be looking to expand their services, provided that they get the proper training and do it through the proper methods.

Steve: Yes. Having said that, there's been a lot of plumbing companies who've looked at the residential sprinkler market, and tested the waters, and have decided it's not for them. There are some differences here that they may have been unaware of going into it that they need to be aware of.

There's different insurance rates. A plumbing contractor's going to pay a higher insurance rate on installing sprinkler systems. There are different – all of a sudden now, they may have to get a system approved by a fire marshal, rather than the local plumbing officials. They've never had to do that before. So there are some differences here that they're going to have to learn to deal with and learn to integrate into their operations. Some of them will become very good fire sprinkler contractors. Others are going to be looking at it saying, this may not be for us, we're good at plumbing, we want to stick to what we're doing here.

Ryan: Got it. So there are some key differences there. They'll either choose to embrace and learn and incorporate into their operations, and others will choose to stick with what they're currently good at and partner with someone else for the fire contracting.

Steve: That's exactly right. There may very well be a lot of partnerships that grow out of this.

Ryan: Absolutely. I could definitely see that as well. Earlier, you started talking about the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition, and one of your current positions is that you're on the Board of the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition. I was wondering if you could give us a background on the organization and how it was formed, because everything I've learned and been involved with, with the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition, it seems to be a truly very unique organization in the industry.

Steve: I can say this –and I'll say this up front – I think as you talk to other people who are involved in the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition - some with competing organizations,



you know, that AFSA competes with - the growth, the development of the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition is probably one of the best things that we have ever participated in in this industry. We are incredibly proud of it. It has done such a remarkable job and even though you've got organizations who are fierce competitors on a lot of other issues, when we walk in and we sit down at those planning sessions on Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition development, those competitions are not there. They go out the window. We cooperate very closely, and we've developed very strong ties with the other participants in the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition.

It was formed originally when the National Fire Protection Association – representatives from NFPA – approached both AFSA and NFSA saying, hey, there's a real interest on the part of the fire service and the larger fire community out there in addressing the issue of residential – single family – 1&2 family residential sprinkler systems. And AFSA has got its own materials. We're printing our own message. We had a residential packet that we would send out to organizations and jurisdictions. The National Fire Sprinkler Association was doing exactly the same thing. They were developing their own materials, they were developing their own strategy, NFPA has its own materials on residential, and its own approach. And frankly, some of the statistics didn't agree. The approach was sometimes different. The message of who we were trying to reach differed a little bit. And after we sat down and we talked about this, all three organizations said, this is an area that we can work together on, we can put aside any competition, and it benefits us to work together to promote residential sprinklers. Not as an individual organization trying to take credit for it, but as participants in a process where we can really build something better. And so as a result of that we formed HFSC. AFSA threw away its residential materials, NFSA threw away its residential materials... NFPA probably didn't throw 'em away, they just put 'em on a shelf! But we agreed to use common materials, which we now do. We agreed that we would develop a common line, a common strategy of who we were trying to reach and the message, and we've stuck to that very, very closely. Because of that, I think it's not only a very unique organization, but it's an organization that has developed a very strong internal structure and a sense of cooperation with each other. It's been a wonderful thing to participate in.

It's grown well beyond – it used to be NFPA, NFSA and AFSA, and now it's CASA– the Canadian automatic sprinkler organization – we've got UL (Underwriters Laboratories) as a participant now, we have FM (Factory Mutual) as a participant, we've got the sprinkler manufacturers industry promotion people, they're involved in it now... HFSC... the United States Fire Administration is a participant in it. We've had major funding, major fire act grants for the last two years through USFA and their fire act grant program. So the original group was small. It's grown not unmanageably, but we've got a good solid steering committee now of very strong participants, and it's been thanks to – I mean, we make a major financial commitment to it, and so does NFSA and so does NFPA, every year. But then, you know, look at the money coming from U.S. Fire Administration, and from CASA, and from the sprinkler industry funds, from sprinkler



manufacturers. It's really given us some tools to promote residential sprinklers the way it should be promoted.

Ryan: That's just fascinating to me when I look at the organizations. As you mentioned earlier, the various organizations that are currently involved - and were involved from the beginning - were able to put aside their differences and come together for a common purpose. Do you have any insight on what made that possible?

Steve: Yeah, I do! I'll tell you why. The reason I think it's possible, is we looked each other in the eye at those initial meetings and said, we're not going to try to take credit for this, you're not going to try to take credit for this. We're creating a separate outside organization that will be the guiding force that will receive the credit. That people will recognize. We're not going to be telling fire service people, 'call AFSA for residential materials.' You call HFSC. And by doing so, that reduced immediately this competitive atmosphere of who's trying to be Number One in residential sprinklers. We're now promoting HFSC. We're not promoting AFSA and we're not promoting NFSA or we're not promoting NFPA. We're promoting HFSC. And that removes the competitive atmosphere in the room.

Ryan: I see. So you're able to get a fresh start with a brand new organization, and there wasn't any concern about who's taking credit.

Steve: Yes. And we all contributed our stuff up front. We took the AFSA materials and the NFSA materials and the NFPA materials and threw 'em in the mix and tried to pick out what was best of the approach and then put HFSC's name on them. Reworked them, obviously, and put them in a different format, but used those kinds of materials as the basis to get it all started.

Ryan: The Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition. It's been very successful and very effective in its mission. I was wondering if you could speak to some of the specific accomplishments that the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition has been able to achieve during its lifetime.

Steve: I'll address a little bit of those; for longer-range view stuff, I think you need to talk to Gary Keith. Initially, one of the first things we really got going was we decided that HFSC was going to be an educational organization; not an advocacy organization. HFSC does not go out and push for codes. HFSC does not go out and try to get local ordinances adopted. It doesn't do that. It's education. It's trying to provide the information for people to make the right kinds of decisions. Now, decision-makers on city councils may very well look at HFSC materials and say, we're convinced residential sprinklers is a good idea. But HFSC is not down there saying, you should adopt this local ordinance. That's not the purpose of it. So we agreed early on that the goal was education, that's where we're going to focus, we're not going to get involved in pushing ordinances or anything else. It's education.



Now, who do we educate? Well, the first thing we decided we had to do was educate the general public, and we devised a campaign directed simply and straightforwardly to the general public using nationally-known spokespersons, using advertising in major publications across the country, and did well at that. Then we realized that we still needed an effort to provide some kind of assistance and additional education to the fire service. So additional materials were developed, an additional campaign directed towards the fire service, to help them with the kits they can use in their local communities. Then we looked at the issues of homebuilders. How can we reduce the reluctance of homebuilders? And so we started an effort to try to educate homebuilders. Now we've really gone off in like three different directions, and that sounds like we might not be using our resources wisely and closely enough, but actually each one has kind of fed into the other, and I think HFSC has been extremely effective in not getting diverted from the task of what we're trying to develop.

The web site, if you look at it you'll see separate sections for consumers, separate sections for the fire service, separate sections for the home building industry. Different materials for each. Almost all of it's free. So we developed a number of CDs and DVDs that can be distributed, videos, B-roll that can be used by local news media, things like that. So the initial impact has been to take this information that was once just kind of scattered among the winds, focus it to different groups, put the HSFC label on it and put some good strong information behind it with good contact information, and it's been extraordinarily successful.

Ryan: Absolutely. I've been to the web site, and it provides a lot of great resources there. In fact, for listeners of this interview, I'd encourage you to go to the HomeFireSprinkler.org web site so that you can see for yourself what it has to offer.

Are there any specific resources available through the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition that you'd like to highlight or bring to listeners' attention?

Steve: Well, generally speaking I think that they've got some very good educational materials for the general public. They've also got for the fire service a public educator kit that has CD-ROMs and DVDs that can be very, very helpful. There's a program on the web site that's kind of a web site game, called Sprinkler Smarts. You can access it through the HFSC web site. It's designed to help kids identify information about sprinklers. That was novel, it was an interesting approach and it hopefully it will help us teach younger people about the concept of sprinklers early on.

Ryan: I'm glad that you mentioned that one, actually. I have four children and I've used that web site, and have found it a great resource.

Steve: It is a great resource.



Ryan: Absolutely. Sometimes we forget about the need to teach our kids about fire safety in the home.

For people that want to support the efforts of the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition, what can people do to help support the efforts of that organization?

Steve: Depends on the position they're in, but generally speaking, if they go to the web site they can download materials. If they're members of organizations they can distribute materials through those organizations, talk up the concept of residential sprinklers in their community. The fire service can certainly get a lot of information that they can use locally as educational efforts.

HFSC is not set up to be like, you know, somebody to send \$10 or \$25 or \$100 to support the effort. HFSC doesn't do that. We're into taking resources from different organizations and trying to create materials that we can give away either free or at cost. But we're not really a fund-raising organization. We're not out there trying to raise money. What we're trying to do is provide tools that people can use. To the extent that people use those tools and are able to spread the word and get the information out about fire sprinklers, residential fire sprinklers, then that's how they help HFSC.

Ryan: Got it. I was curious: Right now - you mentioned it earlier in our discussion - that there are some pending code changes to the International Residential Code and there's the final hearing this September to approve those code changes. The Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition is focused on education. Do they play a role in promoting those code changes at all or do they stay fairly neutral?

Steve: Not in promoting the code changes... Where HFSC has come in is that a lot of HFSC materials are being used by people who are indeed promoting the code changes. It's an educational process for them. HFSC will not be there testifying in favor of that code change. But you will find probably many in the fire service who are advocating that code change who will be using HFSC materials as their talking points.

One of the reasons – and this comes up occasionally – is why isn't HFSC an advocacy organization? Part of the reason for that is that we saw certain political problems in trying to advocate particular positions. Once you start going down the road of advocating this policy or advocating that policy, you're going to lose some people who may not agree with that approach. Education is – once we can come to an agreement about the proper kind of educational role we'll play – that's a lot easier to get consensus on. But we also had some people at the table whose organizational mission prohibited them from being involved in advocacy efforts, so it was a natural for us from the very beginning just to focus entirely on education.

Ryan: I see. And that's one of the ways that you've been able to get some of the organizations that you have involved, committed. Very good.



Well, you've been very generous with your time and your insight today. I have a concluding question, I was hoping you'd be willing to share: When you look at the future, I'm curious to know, what goals do you have for the future and the fire protection industry?

Steve: Well, continued growth – well, I guess if you want to have a vision, I guess one of my visions would be to go into a building, any building in this country and not feel obligated to look up, because I know the fire sprinklers are going to be there. [laughs] Anybody who's in the fire sprinkler industry is going to know that when you walk into a room, you typically look up, and just see what's there. And too often, we're walking into buildings and the fire sprinklers aren't there. So, is it a pipe dream? That someday fire sprinklers will be in every building in America? I don't think so. Will I live to see it? I don't know, maybe not, but that ought to be the ultimate goal, that we know that no matter where people live, where people work, where people play, that they're protected by automatic fire sprinklers. Ultimately, I think that should be the vision of everybody in the industry.

Ryan: Absolutely. That's a very inspiring message, and I share that same message as well, that that is the goal, and they truly are life-saving devices that have been well-proven through the years.

Steve, I really appreciate your taking the time to speak with me today and to share your insights on your background, the industry, and also the important role of the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition. I would encourage listeners to go and visit the www.HomeFireSprinkler.org web site so that they can see for themselves the great resources available, and share those resources with others. I look forward to our next conversation, Steve, and thank you very much.

Steve: You bet, Ryan. You have a good week.

Ryan: This concludes the interview with Steve Muncy. For more information on the Home Fire Sprinkler Coalition, look online, at www.HomeFireSprinkler.org . For a complete selection of home fire protection-related videos, audios, reports and news, visit www.ResidentialFireSprinklers.com .

This is Ryan Smith with Fire Smarts, LLC. Have a fire safe day.