

Tower fire memo stings HFD

Deadly breakdowns revealed

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Houston firefighters battling a deadly high-rise blaze in the Greenway Plaza area last month ran out of hose and air, used the wrong route to the fire and accidentally cut off some communications, leaving one firefighter stranded without air or an escape route, his disappearance unnoticed by others.

The problems were among several listed in an internal Houston Fire Department report on the April 20 fire in the Coastal Tower Building at No. 9 Greenway Plaza. The Houston Chronicle obtained a copy of the report Friday.

Pinkerton security guard Steven Carl Wartemann died in the fire. The report prepared by HFD District Chief Matthew Stuckey says "a series of operational breakdowns ... delayed the rescue of the security guard and the extinguishment of the fire ... (and) almost caused the death of a firefighter."

Stuckey's report also criticizes firefighters for not studying recently published procedures on fighting high-rise fires. "It is (a) well-known fact that many officers have not read it and do not intend to," the report says.

"The only system we have for determining whether our officers are prepared for a high-rise fire is to wait for the fire to occur," Stuckey says in his report.

Houston Fire Chief Eddie Corral acknowledged the problems pointed out in the eight-page document. "That's the way it is in a fire. Nothing's going to go the way you want it to. Otherwise, it would be a piece of cake," he said.

"I'm satisfied they did the best job possible under the circumstances," Corral said of those who fought the four-alarm fire.

"The individual guys did the best they could," agreed one firefighter who weathered the Coastal blaze. "But they did it almost in spite of themselves. And personally, I think it was pure damn luck two or three more people didn't die."

Major failings noted in Stuckey's summary include:

- Some first-alarm companies — the ones designated to reach the scene first — didn't get the alarm and were late responding to the fire. The initial attack crew used the south stairwell because it was accessible to the building lobby. Had the crew used the north stairwell, firefighters would have exited right at the fire scene on the eighth floor and the elevator lobby where Wartemann was trapped.
- Not all the companies at the fire were on the same radio frequency, so they could not communicate. The glitch forced a captain to leave the fire scene to speak face-to-face with his commander. "From that point," the report says, "there was no command and control in the fire area ... this set the tone for the entire incident."
- Stuckey acknowledged there was a discrepancy between building personnel, who claimed numerous sets of elevator keys were available to firefighters, and firefighters, who said the keys would not operate the elevators. However, the report says, it is clear that early in the incident, the security officer did not know how to operate the elevators. Neither did the firefighters.
- The firefighter company designated to attack the fire from the south stairwell had only 100 feet of high-rise hose, which was not enough to reach the fire.
- The captain and crew sent to rescue the guard from the seventh floor used up their bottled air before they could reach him and a second crew had to be sent.
- Pipemen assigned to advance hose in the building were working in heavy smoke and ran out of air before they could finish. The first to run out left the other two and tried to follow the hose they had advanced but couldn't find it. He then tried to work his way along a wall, became lost and ran completely out of air.

"Had he not stumbled into an unlocked office and had he not broken the window, he would surely have died before he was discovered missing," the report states. Firefighters said the frantic firefighter was seen by a security guard at another building, who ran over to point him out to the HFD crews at the scene.

The report also indicates that Wartemann, who was trapped on the eighth floor with the fire, was in radio contact with firefighters inside the building for more than a half hour. The report says that 24 minutes elapsed between the last radio contact with him and the time firefighters finally reached his body.

The district chief's critique of the department's performance at the Coastal fire concludes: "The public deserves and expects more. They think we know what we are doing. We should make a greater effort to be deserving of their trust."

Although he defended the firefighters who battled the Coastal blaze, Corral acknowledged that changes were needed in some polices and procedures, adding that was the reason for Stuckey's report.

"Those are the lessons we learned," said the fire chief.

On August 3, 1993, Fire Chief E.A. Corral hosted the first meeting of a focus group which later became the Houston High Rise Triad.

According to a memorandum from Chief Corral, the original purpose of the meeting was comprised of four basic elements:

1. To make high rise buildings safer.
2. To have each person share their ideas and experience.
3. To focus on training and other related areas.
4. To think in terms of common ways we can all deal with (i.e. - stairwells, stand-pipes, security teams, fire drill procedures)

Private sector attendees included:

- Ken DeFoor of Exxon Corporation
- J.D. Donahoe for Texas Commerce Tower
- Adellene Engelbrecht for The Huntingdon Condominium
- Jim Gafney for 1201 Louisiana Building
- Randy Gaudet for The Hyatt Hotel
- Tammy Gorr – for 1001 West Loop South Building
- Bill Lake – for Houston Center
- Mark Nicholson – Tenneco Building
- Henry Pressley – for Cullen Center
- Terri Prouty – for Houston Natural Gas Building
- Bob Rodgers - Chevron
- Mark Wright – Allen Center and Wells Fargo Plaza

City of Houston attendees included:

- Sonny Evans – Building Department

Houston Fire Department attendees included:

- Chief E.A. Corral
- Assistant Chief William Barry
- Chief Perry Schindelwolf
- Sr. Inspector Jarrel Beard
- Inspector Charles Key

Subsequent monthly meetings were facilitated by Senior Inspector Charles Key who was designated as the representative of Chief E.A. Corral for ongoing communications and leadership of the committee meetings.

Additional representatives of the property management and fire service community were included in the next meeting:

- Donna Alexander – Shell Oil
- Lester Tyra – Houston Fire Department
- Perry Schindelwolf – Houston Fire Department
- Sidney Blankenship – Four Seasons Hotel
- Allen Largent – City of Houston

Elizabeth Addiago of Chevron Corporation, was of invaluable assistance in her role as a meeting facilitator. Using detailed flip chart notations, she was able to capture and summarize a wide variety of ideas and topics, lending unified direction to such a potentially large agenda for the committee.

The first few meetings served to identify just how much disconnect existed between the Houston Fire Department and building owners and managers.

- On the private sector side, training of uniformed security personnel and building engineers was very inconsistent and there were no real industry guidelines on appropriate responses for building personnel.
- On the fire department side, there was a great deal to be learned about the functionality of high rise building designs and systems. Among other things, HVAC controls and elevator operations were not well understood.

Very early on, Inspector Key branded the committee as the Houston High Rise Triad and developed a branding logo to give it a prominent identity among commercial high rise building owners and within the Houston Fire Department.



In September of 1993, District 8 Chief Lester Tyra, joined the Triad and ultimately replaced Chief Barry as the designated representative of the fire suppression division within the fire department.

On November 10, 1993, the Houston High Rise Triad agreed upon its basic tenets:

Mission Statement:

“Triad is a partnership between Building Management and the Fire Prevention and Fire Suppression Divisions of the City of Houston Fire Department, created to develop and recommend a model High Rise Safety Action Plan committed to the protection of life and property.”

Values:

Triad's Mission is based on a foundation of:

- Education and Training
- Documentation
- Operations
- Inspection
- Teamwork
- Compassion

In 1994, the Triad developed and initiated their first action plan:

- Fire Inspections
- Fire Drills
- Fire Prevention Classes
- Pre-Fire Planning
- Fire Warden Training
- New Codes/Ordinances

In January 1995, the Triad formed seven sub-committees:

- Electronic Locks
- Emergency Response Team Training
- City Wide Fire Warden Training
- Fire Drills
- Public Communications
- Elevator Code Requirements
- BOMA Trade Show

In March of 1995, the Triad had expanded its membership to include a wider base of expertise and experience from both the private and public sectors. Additional members added were:

- Elizabeth Addiego – Chevron Real Estate Management
- Sidney Blankenship – Four Seasons Hotel
- Bill Carey – Property Company of America Luis Quintana – Amoco Production Company
- Jeff Levy – St. Joseph Hospital
- Mike Shoup – Exxon Company USA
- James Spell – The Huntingdon
- Jamie Woolsey – Browning Ferris Industries

In July, 1995, the first draft of the Houston High Rise Triad Constitution and By-Laws was drafted. The subsequent years of collaboration and committee work resulted in a number of new high rise fire safety initiatives which included:

- Fire depository boxes
- Firefighter's Orientation Sheets
- Firefighter key rings
- Elevator Safety Guidelines for Phase I and Phase II Operation
- Training curriculum for building emergency response
- Fire Drills
- Electronic locks
- False Fire Alarm ordinances

Many fire safety initiatives originating from the Houston High Rise Triad evolved into new standards and codes for the City of Houston. Some were used as a model for development of standards for other major U.S. cities.

The Houston High Rise Triad was created by and continues to exist at the discretion of the fire chief. As of this writing, the Houston High Rise Triad has served Fire Chiefs:

- Eddie Corral
- Chris Conneally
- Phil Boriski
- Terri Garrison

Communication in an atmosphere of candor, intelligence, and goodwill is the element sought for continued success.