

We're Out to Alarm Texas

Insurance Council of Texas

In 2005, the Insurance Council of Texas (ICT) asked the State Fire Marshal if his office could pinpoint Texas cities that had an above average fire fatality rate among its low income and elderly citizens. The State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) indicated the cities of **Waco, New Braunfels and Lockhart** had per capita, some of the highest fire fatality rates in Texas. With the help of the State Fire Marshal, ICT contacted these city's fire departments to see if they would participate in installing donated smoke alarms into the homes of low income/elderly residents on a first come/first serve basis. Thus, began ICT's "**We're Out to Alarm Texas**" smoke alarm campaign.

The SFMO prepares participation forms for each fire department that enables firefighters to install the smoke alarms into homes without any liability issues. When the program is announced, residents in each city must contact the local fire department to enroll. Firefighters will install the new alarms and inspect each home to make sure other smoke alarms are working properly and point out potential fire hazards. Each fire department keeps track of where they have installed the smoke alarms so that firefighters can determine if the alarms were instrumental in saving lives or property.

The **We're Out to Alarm Texas** smoke alarm program has already saved lives and property. On October 23, 2006, a disabled woman was rescued by Waco firefighters from her smoke-filled home after her donated smoke alarm went off. On April 1, 2007, an elderly New Braunfels couple was awakened during their afternoon nap by smoke alarms, when their roof caught fire. The 92 year old woman was able to reach the front door by herself, but firefighters needed to go inside and rescue the 94 year old husband. Both were uninjured. Fire marshals in both cities said there would have been fire fatalities had it not been for the smoke alarms.

Money for the smoke alarms comes from ICT and Travelers Insurance Company. Travelers designates independent agents in each city as the donors. First Alert also provides a donation of smoke alarms each year to the program. The smoke alarms are presented to each city at a news conference held in and around Fire Prevention Week. The news conferences usually take place at the main fire station. It is here where the program and donation is described and it alerts homeowners on what phone number to call to participate. For more involvement with the story, the fire departments have a home picked out where firefighters can go and install their first smoke alarm to very willing and thankful homeowners. It's a great opportunity for reporters to interview the homeowners on why they wanted to participate in the program and feature local firefighters discussing the use and installment of smoke alarms.

In 2006, the SFMO added four additional cities to the **We're Out to Alarm Texas** smoke alarm campaign. The cities were **Galveston, Farmers Branch, El Paso and Mansfield**. Each city was given approximately 200 First Alert's Ultimate Smoke and Fire alarms for distribution.

In 2007, the program continued to expand by added the fire departments in **Hidalgo and Lufkin**. Additional smoke alarms were sent to already participating cities El Paso, Galveston, Waco, New Braunfels and Farmers Branch.

In 2008, the program started in **Odessa and Edinburg**. Additional smoke alarms were sent to Waco, New Braunfels, Farmers Branch and El Paso. One thousand smoke alarms were distributed. At the Odessa news conference, firefighters chose the home of a Carla and James

Owings, who are both legally blind, to install their first smoke alarm. It was an unusual sight to see the crews from five television stations, one radio station, one newspaper and accompanying firefighters and the State Fire Marshal all fit into a one bedroom home. The Owings could not have been more congenial and pleasing during this circus type atmosphere in their tiny abode and they provided great soundbites. (See attached photo – from left to right Mark Hanna, State Fire Marshal Paul Maldonado Paul Maldonado, Carla and James Owings and agent Shelby Bogan with the Bogan, Dunlap and Wood Insurance Agency in Odessa, Texas)

In Waco, the smoke alarm campaign donated another 500 smoke detectors to the fire department. A news conference was held to announce the donation, but the highlight of the event was an appearance by the homeowner whose life was saved by one of the donated smoke alarms back in 2005. The partially disabled woman could not have been a better spokesperson.

Also in 2008, 14 year old **Buck John of Jefferson, Texas**, who was working toward his Eagle Scout designation, wrote to State Fire Marshal Paul Maldonado asking if he could help provide smoke alarms to his home county in East Texas. John's letter was turned over to the Insurance Council of Texas in hopes that the **We're Out to Alarm Texas** campaign could assist. John wanted to install a smoke alarm into the home of every Meals on Wheels patients in Marion County for his Eagle Scout project. ICT simply asked how many alarms do you need? John and fellow Boy Scouts fulfilled his mission and last year he became an Eagle Scout.

In 2009, **Amarillo and Longview** were added to the smoke alarm program. Additional smoke alarms were sent to Waco, New Braunfels, Farmers Branch and El Paso. Eleven hundred smoke alarms were distributed.

In 2010, many of the fire departments that we have worked with in the past made requests for additional smoke alarms. Edinburg, Amarillo, New Braunfels and El Paso each asked for several hundred smoke alarms this year. With a limited budget of \$10,000 from ICT, \$7,500 from Travelers and a donation of 100 smoke alarms from First Alert, we were able to obtain 1,200 smoke alarms. We will provide an average of 100 smoke alarms for every city requesting them, which included Galveston, Mansfield, Farmers Branch, Longview, Edinburg, Amarillo, New Braunfels and El Paso. In addition, we brought on the fire departments of **McKinney, Wichita Falls and Glen Heights**. We held news conferences in McKinney and Wichita Falls and provided each fire department with 200 smoke alarms. The Waco Fire Dept. had extra smoke alarms and Chief Jerry Hawk provided the Glen Heights Fire Dept. 100 smoke alarms. Five Texas cities did not request smoke alarms this year. They were Waco, Odessa, Lockhart, Lufkin and Hidalgo.

In 2011, the cities of **Abilene, San Angelo, Forest Hill and Breckenridge** were added. We will be holding news conferences in each city to announce the distribution of the smoke alarms to low income/elderly citizens.

To date, 7,550 smoke alarms have been distributed and installed into homes across Texas at a donated cost of approximately \$135,000. Twenty-one Texas fire departments have participated in the **We're Out to Alarm Texas** smoke alarm campaign. ICT continues to work with the SFMO to designate additional cities who have high fire fatality rates among its low income/elderly residents and whose fire departments are willing to participate in the program.

“This project relies heavily on the assistance of firefighters to reach those in need and install these smoke alarms,” said Mark Hanna, a spokesman for the Insurance Council of Texas. “By already saving lives and alerting hundreds of others to the value of smoke alarms, the program has clearly been a success.”