Our Healthcare Future Consultation – Home Fire Risks in the Community response

12/01/2021

The Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) responds to more than 350 house fires each year. Tasmania has one of the highest fire fatality rates per capita in Australia. The 2019 Australasian Fire and Emergency Agencies Council's Preventable Residential Fire Fatalities in Australia research report stated that for Tasmania, 70.3% of deaths occurred in the top 25% of areas of greatest economic disadvantage and smoking materials were the primary cause of the fire. 64% of fatalities were male and 36% were female, with males in the *75-84* and *≥85* age groups over-represented. 29.6% of decedents required support to live at home and 53.3% of decedents lived alone. Whether a smoke alarm was present or not was not known for 51.5% of Tasmanian cases. Residential fires in Tasmania most commonly occur:

- between hours of 8pm-8am. 84.4% of Tasmania deaths occurred from 8pm-8am the majority occurred between the hours of midnight and 4am,
- during the Australian winter months, and
- in the living room/ lounge or bedroom.

Not only is the Tasmanian population ageing, but an increased number of older people are opting to stay in their own homes. This means that the highest fire risk groups will increase in numbers and will also remain living in the community for longer.

There is increased complexity of residential fires in the community of:

- People who do not have smoke alarms or are unable to regularly maintain them,

- People in the community with increased risk, such as people with multiple complex care needs, health conditions and/or disability (including age-related), and/or living in hoarding and squalor will be slower or unable to call for help or unable to self-evacuate in the event of a fire or other emergency,

- People that require medical oxygen, resulting in the storage of oxygen in residential properties, with no warning to firefighters of this hazard in a fire or other emergency, and

- Hoarding behaviour that results in abnormally high fuel loads inside and sometimes outside a residential property, which will impact and impede access for firefighters and have an increased likelihood of being larger fires that require more firefighting resources with increased risk to neighbouring properties.

The workplace health and safety risks for responding firefighters include:

- Increased likelihood of firefighters undertaking search and rescue, with the associated risks, in the homes of people unable to self-evacuate due to limited mobility, mental cognition, disability and/or hoarding,
- Increased risk related to on-site medical oxygen and cylinder malfunction,
- Increased risk of slips, trips and falls in hoarding-related fires, with the increased likelihood of PPE destabilising stacked items during internal attack by firefighters which may result in entrapment,
- Increased risk of exposure to biological hazard and vermin/pests in properties affected by hoarding and squalor, and
- Hoarding households potentially having unsafe or illegal utility connections.

The Our Healthcare Future consult paper indicates the potential of an increase of people receiving health care in their homes. The Our Healthcare Future challenges identified by the Project Manager of Home Fire Risks in the Community project include:

- Mental health supports in the community are lacking to address fire hazards relating to hoarding and squalor,
- Health and community service workers lack of knowledge and skills to assess and address home fire safety risks,
- Health and community service workers not properly resourced to mitigate home fire risks,
- Government and community sector reporting systems are antiquated and have limited or no capacity of interface to make referrals and share information,
- Legislated Acts (Health Act and Fire Services Act) defines and limits information that can be shared,
- Government and community sector staff working in 'silos' while trying to achieve better outcomes of the same 'at-risk' and 'disadvantaged' individuals,
- The lack of knowledge and access to funding to subsidise the cost to install interconnected smoke alarms and home sprinkler systems, as to the Australasian Fire and Emergency Agencies Council recommendations, for those most 'at risk' to residential fires, and
- Despite home fire safety media campaigns and free resources, many people continue to live with an increased risk of being a home fire casualty.

The current Community Fire Safety programs that aim to mitigate home fires of those most 'at-risk' include:

- Home Fire Risks in the Community Project which includes health and community sector support and training of home fire risk assessment and risk reduction and a Residential Hazard Notification system trial in southern Tasmania where agency/service workers notify properties with hazards of hoarding, medical oxygen, bariatrics, or other hazards,
- Winter fire safety campaigns on social media,
- Free fire safety resources, fact sheets, online information, such as the Visual Guide to Home Fire Safety for people with low literacy and/or from CALD backgrounds,
- Project WakeUp! A home fire safety check and installation of smoke alarms, if required, referral program,
- COTA peer education program of home fire safety training to senior volunteers who deliver talks to seniors' groups, and
- Home Fire Safety information sessions to specialised groups on request.

Improving the health and safety of those most disadvantaged and 'at-risk' in our community can be described as a complex, and perhaps a 'wicked', problem. Emergency services, health and community sectors share common behaviour change, prevention, and mitigation aims to address individuals' disparity and disadvantage influenced by their social determinates of health. The Tasmania Fire Services Community Fire Safety Division welcomes a collective impact collaboration to develop and trial solutions to address these complex problems.

Lesley King
Project Manager Home Fire Risks in the Community

Community Development & Education Unit, Community Fire Safety Division
Tasmania Fire Service
Phone (03) 6166 5606 | Mobile 0418 398 004 lesley.king@fire.tas.gov.au