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To: ["Direct to Mayor and Council - DL"](#)
Date: 10/17/2023 9:53:31 AM
Subject: Memo - VFRS - Position Paper on the Risk of Using Lighters and Torches for Supportive
Attachments: VFRS - Memo to Mayor Council_Position Paper on the Risk of Using Lighters and Torches
Units Introduction_2023-10-16.pdf

Dear Mayor and Council,

Please see the attached memo from Chief Fry in regard to a Position Paper on the Risk of Using Lighters and Torches for Supportive Housing Units Introduction.

Vancouver Fire Rescue Services (VFRS) has been grappling with a significant increase in fire incidents, particularly in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) buildings within our jurisdiction. The alarming statistics of fire incidents in 2023, especially those caused by lighter and torch use, call for immediate attention and proactive measures to ensure public safety. This position paper outlines the pressing issues related to these incidents and presents recommendations to address these concerns effectively.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Chief Fry at karen.fry@vancouver.ca

Best,
Paul

Paul Mochrie (he/him)
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The City of Vancouver acknowledges that it is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

MEMORANDUM

October 16, 2023

TO: Mayor and Council

CC: Paul Mochrie, City Manager
Armin Amrolia, Deputy City Manager
Karen Levitt, Deputy City Manager
Katrina Leckovic, City Clerk
Maria Pontikis, Chief Communications Officer, CEC
Teresa Jong, Administration Services Manager, City Manager's Office
Mellisa Morphy, Director of Policy, Mayor's Office
Trevor Ford, Interim Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office

FROM: Karen Fry, Fire Chief/General Manager, Fire Rescue Services

SUBJECT: **Position Paper on the Risk of Using Lighters and Torches for Supportive Housing Units Introduction**

RTS #: N/A

Vancouver Fire Rescue Services (VFRS) has been grappling with a significant increase in fire incidents, particularly in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) buildings within our jurisdiction. The alarming statistics of fire incidents in 2023, especially those caused by lighter and torch use, call for immediate attention and proactive measures to ensure public safety. This position paper outlines the pressing issues related to these incidents and presents recommendations to address these concerns effectively.

Background

The surge in fire incidents is a matter of grave concern:

- The forecast for 2023 indicates 4,500 reportable fires, almost double the number from 2019, and a 25% increase from 2022.
- VFRS is responding to an average of 12 fires per day in 2023.
- Over 13,000 apparatus responses are forecasted for 2023, representing a 31% increase from 2022.
- Structure fires have been particularly problematic, with significant implications:
- An average of 2 structure fires per day have been caused by Smoker Materials or Cooking since 2019.
- In 2023, 60% of SRO structure fires have been caused by Smoker Materials and Lighters.
- These fires not only endanger occupants but also displace residents from valuable housing stock due to fire, smoke, and water damage.

Key Concerns

Several factors contribute to the increasing risk of fires, especially in SRO buildings:

1. **Aging Infrastructure:** Most SROs have aging fire and life safety systems and equipment, making it difficult and expensive to upgrade. Outdated building materials and old exterior fire escapes heighten the risk.
2. **Inhalation Inside Units:** Changes in drug consumption methods from injection to smoking have led to open flames inside rooms. Individuals using lighters or torches in an impaired state risk igniting combustible materials or spilled lighter fluid.
3. **Challenges to Enforce Safety Practices:** SRO residents, often economically disadvantaged and facing limited access to fire safety education, engage in high-risk activities due to drug and alcohol use and mental health issues.
4. **Cooking Fires:** Cooking remains a common cause of fires in non-SRO buildings, which can be preventable or identified quickly to reduce loss, particularly in non-sprinklered buildings.
5. **False Alarms:** An increase in fires has led to a corresponding rise in false alarms, draining firefighting resources.

What We Are Doing

VFRS is dedicated to improving fire safety in Vancouver and has initiated several efforts:

- Fire safety training for SRO managers, adopting a "train the trainer" approach.
- Collaboration with other large metro fire departments to strategize on fire prevention.
- Changes in billing policies for false alarms and adjustments to alarm sensitivities to reduce false alarms.
- Working on By-law changes for sprinkler isolation valves.
- Collaboration with BC Housing to address frequent alarms.
- Public education initiatives, including a "Wake up Vancouver" YouTube series and an annual Fire Prevention Week.
- A comprehensive SRO Study in collaboration with Darkhorse Analytics to identify issues and potential solutions.
- Providing free fire home safety checks for residents.
- Increased enforcement and prosecutions for SRO operators not complying with the Vancouver Fire Bylaw.

Recommendations

To mitigate the risks associated with lighters and torches in supportive housing units, we propose the following recommendations:

1. **Lockable Lighter Ban:** Explore banning the sale and use of lockable lighters in Vancouver, advocating for regulations at the Provincial and Federal levels.
2. **Advocate for Regulations:** Work with BC Housing and housing providers to establish regulations within supportive housing and SRO buildings, including designated inhalation areas and hoarding management.
3. **Pilot Project for Education and Enforcement:** Collaborate with BC Housing for a targeted education and enforcement pilot project in SROs and supportive housing, looking for funding from the Province or Federal Government if available.
4. **Home Safety Check Program:** Utilize increased Public Education staffing to expand the existing Home Safety Check Program and promote it more extensively to residents.

5. **Post SRO Incident Triage and Education Program:** Send the Public Education team to SROs after a fire has occurred to understand the cause and educate residents and staff based on findings.
6. **Implement Darkhorse Report Recommendations:** Once available, implement recommendations from the Darkhorse report to enhance safety.

Conclusion

With the rising number of fires in Vancouver, urgent and targeted actions are necessary to reduce and prevent fires, particularly those related to illicit drug inhalation and open flames from lighters and torches.

A ban on indoor use and sale of such units should be pursued at various government levels. As a fire service, local government, and beyond, addressing these issues is paramount to safeguarding our communities and ensuring public safety.



Karen Fry
Fire Chief / General Manager

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