

# Keeping track

Project to explore national database for fire statistics – finally

By LEN GARIS AND KARIN MARK

**F**ire-service agencies and stakeholders across Canada will be consulted in the spring as part of research for the country's first national fire statistics database.

The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs (CAFC) has launched a year-long project to explore the development of a web-based database of fire statistics that would be available to fire departments and organizations across Canada. The National Fire Incident Database project was funded by a \$149,500 grant from the Canadian Police Research Centre, a federal program administered by the Defence Research & Development Canada - Centre for Security Science (DRDC-CSS).

According to CAFC President Rob Simonds, the project is essential to enhance the operational effectiveness of Canadian fire services.

"By collecting and analyzing fire data, the database will provide fire services the information they need to effectively target their resources, operate more efficiently and increase their fire-prevention capacity. Ultimately, that means safer communities."

Canada lacks a national system for collecting fire statistics, which are important for identifying ways to reduce the impact of fire, according to the 2011 research paper *Can We Develop National Canadian Fire Statistics for Emergency Planning* by Rhéaume Chaput, the fire chief in Belleville, Ont., and chair of the CAFC's fire and life safety committee.

"One of the biggest challenges [in] effecting change in fire safety is the lack of reliable fire statistics," the paper quotes NFPA Canadian regional manager Sean Tracey as saying. "The use of statistics in developing mitigation strategies and emergency planning requires relevant, complete, and accurate data. The lack of national fire statistics in Canada may be hindering the fire services' abilities to address emerging trends and issues."

Data collected through the database could be used by fire departments to strategically deploy their resources, or to amend building codes in response to fire trends. For example, national statistics could be



Canada needs a national fire database to keep track of fire statistics, from structure fires to fatalities.

used to build a business case for changing the national building code to require more sprinkler systems in residences.

On a local level, a fire department could compare its own fire statistics to those of its region or province to identify gaps in service and plan where to apply future resources. Initiatives such as these would help reduce fires, property damage, injury and death.

"It's important from a local, provincial

and national perspective that we have good, robust data to formulate decisions for the future," said Len Garis, fire chief for the City of Surrey and president of the Fire Chiefs' Association of B.C., and the CAFC's representative on the research project.

"Canadian fire services have difficulty accessing timely and accurate data now because we have nothing in place to collect and distribute data on a widespread basis."



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The project will outline the scope for a national system, including types of data to be collected, hardware and software, partner roles and contributions, funding sources, and resources required to set up and maintain the system. The findings will be the basis for justifying the investment in a national database, establishing greater funding support, and pursuing contracting to create the database.

The need for reliable fire data is widely recognized – for example, this spring the International Association of Fire Fighters, the International Association of Fire Chiefs and other fire service stakeholders participated in a symposium to identify a path to a national fire data system in the U.S.

“The International Association of Fire Fighters has often been vocal in calling for a national office for fire service statistics in Canada, and we see this as a positive development,” said IAFF General President Harold Schaitberger.

“We strongly believe that comprehensive data collection and analysis leading to national fire statistics, and the issuance of an annual report that is made available to all fire service stakeholders, would be a tremendous advance for public and for firefighter safety in Canada.”

British Columbia’s University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) is co-ordinating the project research and consultation on behalf of the CAFC. Working with Garis to manage the research team is Dr. Darryl Plecas, director of the Centre for Criminal Justice Research for the UFV’s School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. Noted criminology researcher Paul Maxim, associate vice-president of research at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, will conduct the research.

Consultation in the spring with fire services across the country will include regional round-table meetings with local fire officials and other stakeholders, along with other methods designed to obtain input from the broad spectrum of Canadian fire-service members.

The research team will also investigate existing public and private Canadian data management systems, such as FDM software, the Canadian Police Information Centre, the Province of British Columbia’s provincial data collection approach, and the Canadian fire commissioners’ standard for reporting fire incidents.

International best practices and other countries’ national databases will also be reviewed to determine what they might have to offer within the Canadian context. These include the United States’ National Fire Incident Reporting System – which is maintained by the Office of Homeland Security – and the United Kingdom’s Fire

and Resilience: Incident Recording System, which is maintained by the Home Office.

“We don’t want to reinvent the wheel,” Maxim said. “My suspicion is there may be some systems out there that, with some tweaking, could be the core of a national system.”

A key focus of the research will be ensuring the proposed database will meet the needs of Canadian fire services. The consultation and research will identify what data systems are in use across Canada and why, and what urban and rural fire agencies in different parts of the country would need and expect from a national system.

“At the end of the day, if the individual departments and regions aren’t behind this, it’s not going to work,” Maxim said. “We’re hoping to do a major consultation across the country to try to gauge the amount of buy-in, what they are hoping to get out of it, and what is the gap between what they have now and what they would like. Obviously not everyone’s ideal can be met. But we’re looking to close that gap.”

The CAFC submitted its funding proposal to the Canadian Police Research Centre in late 2010 and received approval in 2011.

DRDC Executive Director Steve Palmer said the project is a good fit with the DRDC-CSS’ mandate, in that the data gathered will help Canadian fire services prevent fires and spare Canadians from their devastating effects.

“We recognize the tremendous value in the development of a national fire incident capability as it will generate an evidence-based approach for decision making, which will help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of fire services,” Palmer said.

“At the end of the day, this project will help the responder community save lives, reduce injuries and work more efficiently, and have tools they can use to help plan their future.”

Information and updates about the National Fire Incident Database research project, including consultation opportunities, will be posted on the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs website, [www.cafc.ca](http://www.cafc.ca). Questions about the project may also be directed to Len Garis, [lwgaris@surrey.ca](mailto:lwgaris@surrey.ca).

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