

Me: I Would *Like* to Do Good. The Authority: What's *Your* Definition of Good?

The push to install residential sprinklers

By Billy Goldfeder



There was quite a bit of good discussion in the past year or so related to residential fire sprinklers, mostly focused on the idea that they work, are affordable, and can pretty much assure a family that future birthday parties *can be counted on*. In the past year, I received a few letters related to this subject of residential fire sprinklers, so I'm going to share my story with you to answer those letters all in one shot.

Admittedly, as I have gotten older I have gotten wiser (in certain specific areas, so please don't generalize). I have always tried to do good with some level of success, and when I didn't achieve it I was usually able to figure out why—starting with looking in the mirror.

One “good” I want to do is something that initially impacted me about 33 years ago, but even more so about nine years ago. Thirty-three years ago, I bought our first home for about \$50,000, and my first daughter was born. In 1983, there was little to no discussion related to residential fire sprinklers. Back then, the heavy push was on what, even then, were relatively inexpensive smoke alarms, which were state of the art. So, our 900-square-foot, one-story wood-frame on a slab house had plenty of them.

RURAL GROWTH

Throughout my career as a chief officer, I have pushed for residential fire sprinklers. I really started pushing in the late '80s when we were faced with huge growth in rural areas without municipal water. It made good sense to me and especially my #2 in command who really took the issue to heart. Keith, like many of you, understood the impact and risk of large (really large!) homes being built in areas without municipal water. He discovered a system where residential sprinklers could be installed with 300-gallon tanks in basements or garages. Ingenious. At least to Keith ... and me.

This was a sprawling rural area with McMansions being built by the day, protected by volunteer firefighters (responding from home or work when the pagers beeped and the whistles blew), in an area

with no municipal water. What usually happened in the event of a fire? **Do the math.** Keith's idea solved a huge problem and would absolutely save property and lives. He tried to do good.

It didn't take long for the elected officials to cordially and *very* unofficially “like” the idea (after numerous demos, facts, etc.), but they wanted absolutely nothing to do with actually *requiring* the idea. “Who are we to tell people what to do” was a statement—not a question. After all, they had “relationships” with the builders. Cough. Cough. Wink. Wink.

Keith tried to do good. Could his idea have solved numerous problems, helped literally tens of thousands of people, and even saved money? Absolutely. Have beautiful homes burned to the ground despite hard working firefighters? Yep. To the ground.

Do homebuilders have a clear business interest in rebuilding burned down homes? I can give you several billion examples of yes. Although homebuilders support smoke alarms, they aren't fans of residential sprinklers. Why not? Because it adds an “unnecessary” cost to the buyer. Cough. Again. Actually, residential fire sprinklers would reduce the business of rebuilding burned up homes. BINGO.

Burned up homes can be rebuilt, but what about memories and personal property such as photos, family bibles, computers, and wedding dresses? Not so much. And then there is the issue of the occupants.

EXPANDING FAMILY

About nine years ago, I was wonderfully blessed when I received the title of Poppie. There is NOTHING more important to me than what that title means and what our now six grandbabies (that my wife Teri and I love beyond words) mean to us. Those babies are absolutely our life, and our actions reflect that 24/7/365.

As required in the Poppie job description, I spend every minute I can with the babies doing whatever they wanna do—buying them whatever they want and feeding them ice cream for breakfast, donuts for lunch, and pizza for dinner. It's part of my policy manual.

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As my own kids are getting older and building or buying homes, we wanted to do more for them.

- Swings? Check.
- Trampolines? Check.
- Legos? Check.
- Toy animals and dolls? Check.
- Garbage trucks? Check.
- Firefighter toys, shirts, and apparatus? Check.
- Build-A Bears? Check.
- Ninjas with weapons? Check.
- Smoke alarms? Check.
- Residential fire sprinklers? Ch ... Hold on.

The first house was easy. My son, his wife, and their two daughters built a home in Maryland where there is no choice—new homes get built with residential fire sprinklers. Local lawmakers made a law to protect their constituents. And the homebuilding business is still doing just fine. And while maybe the rebuilding of badly burned down homes isn't as profitable, the business of drying wet stuff is doing really well. Fires go out quicker, memories last longer—and so do people. In Maryland, the fire chiefs and the elected officials did good.

IT'S NOT RESIDENTIAL

The next home was my oldest daughter's. Her husband planned, designed, and eventually built a very cool home (from the ground up) for her and their two boys. In talking with Teri, we wanted to buy them a gift—definitely a different kind of gift. This was an opportunity to “treat them” to a residential fire sprinkler system. We wanted to do good. Unfortunately, there is no requirement for residential fire sprinklers in Ohio.

We did all we needed to do financially, working with a contractor, and all was going well until one day the regional water “AUTHORITY” reviewed it and (as simply as I can put this) told us that they didn't “recognize” residential fire sprinkler systems. To them, this was a “regular” fire sprinkler system. *Not good.*

“Regular” meant that it has the same requirements as a commercial system. *More not good.* So, we asked what the cost would be for the “tap” fee, to which they responded “in the neighborhood of \$25,000.” After all, “they” didn't recognize residential fire sprinkler systems.

And you people call yourselves an authority.

I won't bore you with the numerous phone calls, e-mails (many unanswered), and the epitome of bureaucracy we dealt with, but they wouldn't budge. We were fully supported by the local building department, the fire department, the National Fire Sprinkler Association, and the Ohio State Fire Marshal but not that damn “authority.” But we had a house under construction, and I was determined to get it sprinklered. Of course, so was the water authority, as long as we paid that fee based on their out-of-touch, uneducated, close-minded, and antiquated thinking. They did offer a “process” for us to appeal, but as one of their representatives hinted (more winking), we shouldn't waste our time. So, we didn't. Not all so-called authorities are *really* authorities. *Remember who told you that.*

Remember, our goal was to protect my oldest daughter and her beautiful family, and we were going to do it no matter what “authority” got in the way. I thought back to Keith's idea (which is not all that unusual anymore), and even though there is a hydrant literally

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in their yard tied to a big water main in the street, there is now a 300-gallon water tank in their basement in their fully sprinklered home. Would I have rather had it tied in? Yep. But we decided to become our own authority and do good regardless of the obstacles.

ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS

We now have two more homes to cover with retro systems—my youngest daughter's family home and my home. The good news is we are going to do it; the bad news is that we are still under the evil water authority so we won't be doing it with them.

We have found an interesting system called Plumis that was invented in the United Kingdom. It has a relatively affordable product that allows us to use the domestic water lines, and it feeds a unique residential fire protection system. We are in the process of speccing systems for both homes.

The versatility of the systems allows us to protect specific areas or the whole home. There is even a portable system that you can place in your aging grandparents' home. I have no business interest in that or any other fire sprinkler company; Teri and I simply wanted to do good, and we searched for a long time for a solution.

Thankfully, the fire chiefs and politicians in Maryland took care of the first home and my son's family. Absent of residential fire sprinkler laws in Ohio, Keith and his internal tank system idea took care of my oldest daughter and her family, and now the two


other homes will be taken care of because of some outside the box, unique, and progressive thinking.

This all started because we wanted to do good. I also got tired of being embarrassed when people would ask if my home was sprinklered after I urged them to get theirs built sprinklered. While I built our home in 1995, the builders made it real clear that they had no experience with that and wouldn't consider offering it. "Sprinklers? Oh, you mean for the lawn? Yes. The house? Why would you want to do that?" So, I blew the idea off. I didn't try hard enough to do good back then. And now, 22 years later, we are finally taking care of it. Following that, we will be back at the "authority" working to change their level of knowledge with whatever help we can get.

No one knows the nightmare that fire causes more than us. We have seen it and we know how it can horrifically alter lives. I'm not sure there is anything better we can do than to do good for those whose pictures are in our wallets.

When we are out there pushing local communities to have residential sprinklers as a requirement, one of the best places for us to start as an example would be our own homes. We need to genuinely be the authority, professionally and personally.

Wait ... What's that song? ... shhh ... listen ... *I fight authority, authority always wins. I been doing it since I was a young kid, and now I've come out grinnin' ... as we became authority, and authority always wins.*

Whoa. That song. It sounds strangely familiar. 



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