

# FIRE STOPPERS

## Youth Firesetting Intervention Program



### PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Fire Stoppers program at Seattle Fire Department works effectively to address the issue of youth set fires by offering assessment, education and treatment services. For over a decade the program has offered help and support to the children and families involved in a firesetting incident. There are many factors that can contribute to firesetting behavior: low understanding of what fire is really like, easy access to matches and lighters, lack of supervision, psychological factors, behavioral issues, peer influence and home and family stress situations, to list a few. Understanding the motivation behind the firesetting is usually the best way to stop it. The Fire Stoppers program conducts a fire safety needs assessment of the child and their environment, provides valuable life saving education to the child and the family, as well as referral to community, social and behavioral health services when indicated. Fire Stoppers is the designated a model youth firesetting intervention program by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) U.S. Fire Administration. The success of this program is attributed to its strong network of public safety agencies, juvenile justice, behavioral health providers, and schools. Because of the seriousness of youth fire use and the tendency for the behavior to resurface at a later date, even if the child appears frightened or remorseful of the incident, it is essential that the safety needs of the family and community be given significant consideration and priority. With this in mind the approach to assessment, education and treatment is done with a high degree of time, attention and concern.

### REFERRAL TO THE PROGRAM

First responders to the incident, whether police or fire, are critical players in facilitating a successful referral to the program. During most years, approximately 70% of referrals to the program are from fire and police department personnel. These are all children who were determined to have not committed a chargeable offense or who were under the chargeable age. Any child under the age of 18 is eligible for the program. Additional referrals are made by schools, parents, DSHS caseworkers, therapists and King County. For those children who are charged with a crime, referral into the program may happen by way of a diversion committee or by the court order of a judge after the case goes to prosecution.



### PROGRAM OUTLINE

The first of two appointments for a Fire Stopper's intervention will be approximately 90 minutes in length. The Fire Department interventionists will interview the child and the child's parent/caregiver. It is important to note that the Fire Stoppers program requires a guardian's participation. The Fire Stoppers interventionist must have a guardian's written consent to conduct the interview, provide education and make a referral to behavioral health and community services.

All interventions are conducted in a controlled environment. This is usually Fire Headquarters in Pioneer Square, but may on occasion be at a school or a fire station. Interventions are not conducted at a family's residence. Most interventionists work in teams of two. Civilian personnel in the program are professional educators with experience working with at-risk youth. Uniformed personnel have undergone specialized training for this additional duty.

### Confidentiality

The assessment process is confidential and the information gathered strictly controlled. A release of information form authorizes the sharing of information with appropriate individuals/agencies, depending on the case, such as the child's school, therapist, foster parent, law enforcement officers, etc. Although all files are confidential, the court can subpoena records in certain cases.

Contact the Fire Stoppers Office at:

206-386-1338

## **Interview and Needs Assessment**

The child and family meet in a non-threatening and confidential atmosphere with their intervention team. Using a standardized assessment interview format involving both caregiver and child, information is obtained about the child's fire history, family situation, social environment and pertinent medical history. Based on this information, a determination of the child's firesetting behavior is made and the appropriate intervention response developed. This is for assessment purposes only to determine the scope of response by the intervention team.

### *Simple Firesetting*

A child found to exhibit *simple firesetting* may be just curious, with no intent of doing harm, as well as lacking adequate education about fire safety. They often have easy access to firestarting materials and insufficient supervision. For these children and their families, age appropriate and relevant fire prevention education is provided by Fire Stoppers personnel. Additionally, recommendations and resources are provided to caregivers for effective environmental controls.

### *Complex Firesetting*

Children that intentionally set fires fall under the category of *complex firesetting*. Complex firesetting often stems from a variety of motivations and conditions. For these children, fire safety education and environmental controls are partnered with appropriate behavioral health treatment strategies provided either by therapists through the Fire Stoppers program or the child's own therapist. This category can include expressive, delinquent, strategic and pathological firesetters.

## **Education**

Fire safety education is provided to all parents and children throughout the intervention process. Emphasis is placed on understanding fire behavior, taking personal responsibility for safety, developing successful choice making skills, understanding fire safety rules, legal consequences within the juvenile justice system and the scope of parental roles/responsibility. Parents are provided with a parenting handbook with detailed information on dealing with firesetting behavior. Take home assignments are provided for the child and family to complete together in order to reinforce the concepts introduced during the education session.

## **Safety Plans**

Upon completion of the needs assessment for firesetting behavior performed by the intervention team, an individualized *Fire Safety Plan* is provided for the youth's guardian. This clearly spells out environmental, educational and behavioral recommendations for halting future firesetting behavior. Through application of this multifaceted approach the majority of firesetting behavior can be halted.

## **Behavioral Health Referrals**

About a third of children assessed score as complex in their firesetting behavior and are referred for behavioral health services or psychological evaluation. The intervention team will work with each family to locate and gain access to appropriate services.

## **Follow Up**

Follow-up phone interviews are conducted with program participants several months after intervention completion. Follow-ups help evaluate the effectiveness of the program as well as document incidents of recidivism.

## **PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS**

For those families who are not mandated to participate by King County Juvenile Court, the Fire Stoppers program is completely voluntary. Successful completion of the program may be required by another agency, such as Seattle Public Schools, for re-admission. If a recommendation is made for behavioral health services, this information is provided both to the family as well as the court representative.

## **PROGRAM COSTS**

There is no charge for any Fire Stoppers services provided by the Fire Department. Fees for behavioral health services may be required, depending on the child's eligibility for assistance or insurance. Funds for these services are available on a limited basis for families experiencing financial hardship.