Cumberland County

Youth Fire Safety Program

Annual Report 2021

As 2021 closes the Youth Fire Safety Program is still under the effects of the COVID pandemic and all of its restrictions. This year has proven to throw all contacts and numbers away from the normal. According to the State Fire Marshal’s records, this year showed an unusual decrease for youth caused fire cases throughout the State. In running numbers for our newly revised brochure, Richard Taylor, from the SFMO, ran the numbers more than once to validate the information he was seeing. His belief was that because of the youths being required to stay at home and the more constant supervision of parents, it was cause for the number of cases declined significantly. Because of the decline incases the program took advantage and directed more time to improve the contents and educational process of the program.

The program, working with the State Fire Marshal’s Office and the York County Collaborative to update the state’s general protocols for the Youth Fire Safety Program. The original protocols were developed but the State through a grant received from the National Fire Academy and was administered through SMCC. An office was established at SMCC and help develop the Juvenile Fire Setter program. The grant helped train people statewide in the JFS 1 and JFS 11 curriculums. These trained individuals in methods of running the program, educational tools, and the interviewing process of clients. Training was held throughout the State and several hundred people were trained. Another part of the grant was used to develop a statewide protocol book for use in all areas to set guidelines on procedures. The protocol book included forms for the handling of clients. Some forms included consent forms, rating schedules, and educational materials. As the book was being developed, items like the consent form were submitted through the Attorney General’s Office for validation. The protocol book had not been updated since the beginning and was very outdated. New forms were developed, testing procedures were updated and educational materials were also updated. The change made were present to the SFMO and accepted to be the protocol to be used statewide. This new protocol book will include the new YFS Awareness program that two members of the Cumberland County group developed. Chuck Jarrett from Windham and Mike Mack, JCCO, worked together to update an old presentation developed at the SMCC office. The program will introduce people who are unaware of the program to what the program is all about. This will also be a unit that will be used statewide.

During the meetings of the CCYFS program, we are usual joined by members of the York County group and have picked up members of the group from Oxford County. York County is well established and has two people you have worked quite some time with the program. Oxford County is a new group and is happy to get help, information, and guidance from the rest of us. It is possible in the near future that we will also be seeing members from the Androscoggin and Sagadahoc Counties as they come on line. It is a goal to establish and group of leaders from all of the counties to represent the YFS programs throughout. Not all counties have an active program nor every community.

During the first part of the year, the York County group was contacted by the Maine Youth Center to come into the center to offer classes to some of their clients. York County kicked the request to the CCYFS, as MYC is located in Cumberland County. It was decided that I would work with the York County group and offer a class to MYC. A date was established and a presentation was given in October. It was a great class offered to four clients, because the other four had attitude issues. The presentation was a Jeopardy based game that pitted the four kids against the 5-6 staff members in the room. The presentation lasted about three hours and was very well accepted by all. We interviewed all the participants after the game was done and all gave examples of what they learned. The MYC indicated that they would like the group back to do further education. We wait for their request.

It was decided in March that the Program needs to update an old tri-fold brochure that was put together back at SMCC under the grant. Work started by the group to find ways to give the brochure better and clearer information. It was decided that the name of the group and the flyer be changed to conform to the national change. There was a move to remove and word juvenile and replace it with the word youth this changing the name from Juvenile Fire Setter to Youth Fire Safety. The next major change was the rewriting of the mission statement. The old statement seemed too long and wordy, so after much debate and deep though the mission statement was changed. The statement now reads, “To reduce the incidence of fire-related loss of life, personal injury and property destruction in Cumberland County by assessing youth who are at risk of fire setting behavior, providing fire prevention education to the youth, their parents and referring families to appropriate services”. The group agreed with the updates and changes and we had 500 copies printed. I traveled throughout the county to every community and met with most of the fire chiefs. I presented them copies of the flyer and explained the mission of the collaborative. I offered them my assistance in any way I could. In communities where I had no contact with the chief, I left copies with the town office to forward to the chief. Depending on the size of the community and the perceived exposure, I left from five to 20 copies of the flyer with the instructions to use them as needed and pass out to other agencies in the community and to parents and schools as needed.

During the May meeting, it was decided to move the regular meeting from the third Thursday of the month to the Third Tuesday of the month. The time would stay the same. This move had been requested by a couple of regular members of the committee and was received well by the others.

Also in May, the CCYFS was informed that at the request of the SFMO, the Pine Tree Burn Foundation would become the statewide group that would be responsible for developing and organizing the educational aspect of the YFS statewide. PTBF is a statewide organization that initially was developed to secure money for the state’s burn center at the MMC. Recently the group has been offering statewide training to all services in the State on safety, fire prevention, elder care, and other health and safety related subjects. PTBF will set a standard of care throughout the State for the YFS program. They will coordinate a computer-based education for our clients to receive standard and timely education. All areas of the State will have easier access to training and educational materials.

In June, the SFMO was informed that the Department of Education is looking to move fire prevention back into the school systems throughout the State. This is a great opportunity to get fire prevention education to the younger people in the State. Better, it becomes a mandate that must be taught in all schools statewide.

A discussion was started that there existed a Facebook page that is owed by the Cumberland County Juvenile Fire Setter program. The page has not been updated in quite some time and the administrator was former program director, Rick Shepard. An effort was made to contact Rick for the password for the page to start the process of updating the materials. Shepard was difficult to make contact with and it was decided to set a date of Labor Day to make that contact or make another page that the program cold control and update. Shepard did come through with the information needed and the process begin to find someone to evaluate the page. Deputy Mike Williams, from the South Portland Fire Department, said he would assess the page and suggest changes. Williams followed-up and suggested he would forward the page to Zack Tooker, a member of the SPFD and keeper of the South Portland Fire Department’s FB page. Progress is being made on that update.

In August, I represented the program in Windham at an SRO conference. My part was participating in a panel discussion about restorative justice and how we could help educate clients to keep them out of the court system. The conference was attended by approximately 50 people that were largely made up with SRO from around the State. The panel discussion lasted above three hours and was very informative to the people in the auditorium. I also attended the same conference last year that was held in Augusta.

In September, Chief Mike Thurlow announced that he would be retiring as Chief of the Scarborough Fire Department in January of 2022. The retirement is a huge loss to the Cumberland County program as Chief Thurlow has been with the program since the beginning. He was an advocate for the program in moving the program to under the umbrella of the Cumberland County Fire Chiefs and later the partnership with the Cumberland County Emergency Management Agency. Thurlow helped produce the first budget for the program and presented the concept of a part-time program director. Mike was also the leader of the Board of Directors for the program. Chief Thurlow also offered space for meetings and the use of the Town of Scarborough’s Zoom conference calling license to conduct meetings. With the retirement of Chief Thurlow, the program is now actively searching for a new member of the board from the CCFCs. This search is being hindered by not only the pandemic but also the lack of attendance at the meetings of the CCFCs and interest to commit. Thanks to Chief Thurlow for all his time and energy to move the YFS program forward throughout the years.

Cumberland County Fire Chiefs has been contacted for a replacement of Chief Thurlow.

The group, along with York County and the SFMO are reviewing the list of trainers developed in the 80’s. There are many names but we need to evaluate how many of those people are still interested, around, or even alive. We are in the process of training more trainers with the last batch receiving instruction via a zoom class. The last class had 15 students from four different counties. The class was filled within five days of the offering.

In December, the program had purchased a license to conduct Zoom conference calling. This license will be used to conduct not only meetings but also classes, clients’ interviews and Zoom fire education classes. The PTBF is planning to develop programs that can be held through Zoom to replace and/or supplement the fire schools that are ow being offered. This will the client to go through the fire school in a timelier manner and be used statewide to deliver the same message and instruction standard statewide. There will be less need for instructors and an increased need for moderators for the classes.

It is a goal that the Youth Fire Safety Program be standardized across the state. The method of instruction and presentation, forms and education will be consistent with the best and latest information.

During the past year, we have had several referrals. Some of the referrals have been handle at the lowest levels within the departments of origin. Mike Mack had contact will 4-6 youth with all handled by the reporting agency. Gray had two people handled locally. The Forestry Department notified us of a client. They took care of that one. Westbrook had contact with six clients and all were handled in house and all involved in the incident. South Portland had two referrals, with both handle by the department. At the change of the year, the program was notified of a client in the City of Portland. The information was pass on to the department and a meeting is set up with the client and the parents to meet in the first part of January 2022.

Looking forward, there is a big need for all the departments in the county to report all contacts with the YFS program. Whether the problem is mitigated at the local level or need to proceed through the program, there needs to be an accurate number of incidents involving youth within the county and eventually the State. These contacts must be tracked in the YFires database. Without accurate numbers, the existence of the programs statewide will not exist. As I meet with individuals or at meetings, I am constantly requesting that more information be forwarded. I am on the standing agenda for the Cumberland County Fire Chiefs’ Association meetings and have an opportunity to meet with the Northern Cumberland County Fire Chiefs in early spring. At that meeting, I will be presenting the YFS Awareness program to all who will attend. I attended one of their meetings two years ago and they have a good turnout and attract Chief from Oxford and York counties. I am also looking forward to the involvement of the PTBF and the development of the statewide curriculum and delivery system.