



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE FIRE MARSHALS  
FIRE RESEARCH & EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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**NASFM Foundation Issues Report on Addressing Lack of Fire Causes in NFIRS:  
Start by “Closing the Loop”**

Updating fire incident data reports when fire departments obtain new information, such as fire investigation results, could have the largest impact of any activity on reducing the high percentage of serious fires reported as having undetermined causal data, according to a report released today by the National Association of State Fire Marshals Fire Research and Education Foundation (the NASFM Foundation). The NASFM Foundation refers to this activity as **“Closing the Loop”** on a fire incident report.

With a 2011 Fire Prevention & Safety grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Assistance to Firefighters Grants program, the NASFM Foundation’s research focused on addressing the problem of “unknowns” in the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) – specifically, undetermined and/or missing data about causes of fires in NFIRS. This problem seems to be especially prevalent for more serious fires, particularly those involving fatalities.

“Without a true picture of the causes of fires, decisions based on NFIRS data are negatively affected,” said J. William Degnan, NASFM Foundation President and New Hampshire State Fire Marshal. “All levels of government, from local fire departments to state and federal agencies, as well as private organizations, rely on NFIRS data to help with activities such as allocating resources, identifying hazards and risks, developing targeted fire prevention programs and determining training priorities, to name just a few.”

In addition to the recommendation on updating fire incident reports when new information surfaces, the report identifies four other recommendations to address the problems identified with undetermined and missing causal factors data in NFIRS:

· **“Clear the Litigation Cloud”:** Some incomplete data for fire cause reflects hesitation due to liability concerns, a factor the report calls the “Litigation Cloud.” While this is a difficult situation to address, the report highlights the need to clarify the levels of certainty specified by NFPA 921 Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations for different types of fire incidents, and points to several activities by states and localities to ease fire departments’ liability concerns and to increase the level of expertise devoted to cause determinations and fire investigations.

(more)

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- **“Fill the Black Hole”:** To address the myth expressed by many fire departments during our research that fire incident data collection is unimportant and that the data ends up in a “Black Hole” that goes nowhere, the report recommends training for chiefs, officers and front-line personnel on the concepts and reasons behind the need for reporting, as well as how fire incident data can be used to advance fire prevention and suppression goals.
- **“If the System is Broke, Fix It”:** The current NFIRS System was viewed by many fire department personnel in our research as overly complex and not user-friendly. The NASFM Foundation recommends that it is time to start developing the “next generation” of NFIRS, which should incorporate modern technology, reflect the situations and environments encountered in today’s firefighting, and accommodate the diversity of fire departments’ capacities. It should include input from those who enter the data at the department level, as well as those who analyze and use the data at all levels.
- **“Put in Quality Data, Take Out Quality Data”:** To address the lack of quality control and quality assurance that many fire departments reported when it comes to reporting fire incident data, the NASFM Foundation recommended designating a fire department “Data Champion” and adopting standard operating procedures and guidelines for fire incident data collection; emphasizing the importance of dedicated State NFIRS Program Managers to helping fire departments achieve higher data quality; and revitalizing the National Fire Information Council with a focus on developing strategies and training to improve the quality of the nation’s NFIRS data.

“Many of our recommendations rely on the allocation of resources, and a lack of resources is a chronic problem in the fire service, from the smallest volunteer department up to the U.S. Fire Administration itself,” Degnan said. “But we rely on data for so much of our mission to keep the public and our firefighters safe, so it is to everyone’s advantage to work toward improving the system, our appreciation of the need for data collection, and the accuracy with which reports are completed.”

The NASFM Foundation’s research included in-depth interviews with fire department personnel, as well as an online survey of nearly 3,500 fire service representatives involved in the collection of fire incident data for their departments. The report, “Conquering the ‘Unknowns’: Research and Recommendations on the Chronic Problem of Undetermined and Missing Data in the Causal Factors Sections of the National Fire Incident Reporting System” and its appendices and related material, are at the link: [http://www.firemarshals.org/files/Resources%20Page/Fire%20Incident%20Data/NASFM FoundationFinalReportConqueringtheUnknowns.pdf](http://www.firemarshals.org/files/Resources%20Page/Fire%20Incident%20Data/NASFM%20FoundationFinalReportConqueringtheUnknowns.pdf)

### About the NASFM Foundation

The National Association of State Fire Marshals Fire Research and Education Foundation (NASFM Foundation), a 501(c)(3) organization, works with companies, government agencies, associations, academic institutions and others that strive to achieve higher levels of fire safety for consumers and for the emergency response community. The NASFM Foundation works to support the mission of the National Association of State Fire Marshals -- to protect life, property and the environment from fire and related hazards -- through science, innovation, research and education.

[www.firemarshals.org/NASFMFoundation](http://www.firemarshals.org/NASFMFoundation)

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