

Four Steps to Building a Better Relationship with Your AHJ

By Tamara Matthews

When you are doing work in the fire safety business, it helps to have public safety officials on your side. Interactions with authorities having jurisdiction (AHJs) are a necessary part of business. Are you making the best of the relationships you have? Do you sometimes wish for less conflict and more common ground?

Firewatch! spoke with Jim Narva, senior policy director for the National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM), and Alan Shuman, president of NASFM and the state fire marshal of Georgia, to get some feedback on how our two industries can better communicate with each other. As a result of the discussion, some ideas evolved that are pretty straightforward and easy to implement.

If your relationship with your AHJ could use some improvement, these four steps can help set you on the right track.

1. Know the Requirements for Everywhere You Do Work

In order to follow the rules, it helps to know what the rules are. Unfortunately, as you know, the same rules are not going to apply everywhere your company might do work. Unless you have the extreme fortunate of being able to pick up all your business within one single metropolitan area, your company will be doing jobs in different cities, different counties, and across state lines even. “Understand that what one jurisdiction adopts and enforces may be different than what another one does,” says Narva. “Each jurisdiction will usually have unique provisions they have adopted to address local needs.”

So if you don't know which rules apply? Go to your state fire marshal's office. “It's a first step and the fire marshal is going to be able to give NAFED members the direction as to where to go,” Narva assures. “Each city or town in a state, they may very well be their own jurisdiction and in other cases the state may be responsible for it...So the first step would be to check into the fire marshal's office, make sure you're licensed, and to register or anything you need to do and then they can point you in the right direction.”

Sometimes the information is as close as a mouse click away. Shuman says the Georgia state fire marshal's office has information available on its website. “We develop rules and regulations for the minimum requirements of the law, so we try to post all that onto a website where it's accessible.”

How will all this digging for information help with an AHJ relationship? In general, a set of established rules can help create mutual understanding between different groups. This is very much true in the fire protection industry. Not only will a thorough knowledge of the abiding codes demonstrate good faith to your local AHJ, it will help place you both

on the same page in regard to the work that needs to be done and how that work should be conducted.

It helps to think of regulations as not restricting the work you do, but rather enhancing it. This is a partnership, with fire equipment distributors and AHJs working together toward the goal of public safety. Narva says rules and regulations “aren’t there to create unnecessary burden to contractors but are to help ensure adequate oversight of the project and that adopted codes and standards are met.”

2. Get to Know Them

You may have gotten used to the idea of networking to gain clients and business contacts, but networking with AHJs? Sure. “Go to lunch!” says Shuman. “It’s not going to hurt anybody to do that, just to get to know everybody. I think it’s important. We’re all in this business to save a life and that’s part of it.”

Familiarity leads to trust, which can lead to better communication. The Georgia state fire marshal makes a point of leaving the door open to contractors. Shuman says, “The important part...is making sure that we have an open line of communication or an open door policy where they can come in and talk to us about getting started, whether it’s for testing, licensing, permits, but also on any changes we need to make with our state laws to stay up-to-date on the new technology that exists...Technology changes on a daily basis so we have to have open communication with these folks that are out there doing this job.”

How you approach the relationship will make a difference. If you have not yet had any interaction with your state fire marshal, now may be the time for an introduction. If you would like to branch out and do work in a new locale, make sure a brief conversation with the relevant state fire marshal or AHJ is one of the first things you do.

“It’s certainly good to build those relationships amongst the two industries, contractors and the AHJ, at any time that you can,” says Narva. “The ones that stick out are when they say, ‘Look I’m new in town,’ or ‘I’m wanting to do business, what do I need to do to comply with your rules and regulations?’”

Shuman heartily agrees. “If you’re going to do business in a community, do your due diligence to make sure that you’re covering the bases you need to cover.”

Leaving a positive first impression can help you out down the line. Things may be going well now, but what happens when something goes wrong? What happens when you need the AHJ’s support? “You’ll find that if you’re upfront in the beginning it may go a lot smoother,” says Shuman. “You’ll be surprised at the help you can get from the state fire marshal and the authorities having jurisdiction.”

As far as introductions go, it can help to have a strong state association. GAFSED (Georgia Association of Fire Safety Equipment Dealers) has helped facilitate connections

between the state fire marshal's office and local distributors in the state of Georgia. "We have an outstanding opportunity where we communicate with each other frequently," Shuman says. "We certainly participate in the state organization's educational tracks throughout the year. The Georgia fire marshal's office was involved in the state association getting put together, so we were very fortunate. We've had some great communications."

3. Get Involved

A strong way to develop your relationship with the AHJ is to make your company's presence known in the community through outreach efforts. Such involvement will leave a favorable impression and give you the opportunity to team up with other fire safety professionals.

One of your prime opportunities? Shuman says, "You could probably start with fire prevention week in October. It's a good time for the contractor to go to that local fire official or fire code enforcement official and try and find some way to partner up regarding education."

All it may take is a phone call to the local fire department asking, "How can I help?" Maybe you'd like to offer fire extinguisher training or extinguisher inspection drop-offs during a community event. Maybe you'd like to add your company name to a list of sponsors. Shuman points out that fire prevention week is a good time to submit an article to a local newspaper on the importance of meeting minimum fire safety requirements and why servicing fire equipment on a regular basis is essential to the protection of life and property. There is a lot you can do to get your company name out there to potential clients and to fire code officials alike.

In Shuman's experience, "Many times the local fire officials will open up for the local fire organizations...They may have some type of fundraiser, whether it's a golf tournament, softball tournament, to raise awareness of not only fire safety, but to also maybe make donations to a burn center or to assist in other fire prevention activities throughout the year."

If you'd like to take it beyond fire prevention week, you are certainly welcome to extend your reach. Narva recommends going to the state fire marshal and asking, "I want to help you, how can we do that?" He says, "They'll give you a long list of things specific to their agency. It may not even be financial help. Maybe it's helping advertise or bringing something in for a demonstration. It's not always about money."

Education and community volunteerism are more important than ever with a tough economy. Many states are experiencing budget shortfalls, and this could mean delays in inspections if there are fewer inspectors in the field. "Is there going to be a problem in the future with inspections not being conducted on an annual basis and having to be moved back to every two years? There certainly will be," says Shuman. "But I think if we

continue to work in a partnership, we can see that that is not going to be an issue. I think that it leads to some opportunities for all of us.”

With the public sector strained, there is an opportunity for private industry to lend a hand. Ensuring that your company is doing the highest level of work, keeping on top of regulations, and maintaining a positive connection with the state fire marshal will help fire code officials sleep better at night. “I firmly believe that if you don’t police yourselves, or regulate yourselves, regardless of the fire marshal, how he interacts or what happens, we’ll find ourselves in a heck of a mess here,” says Shuman.

You can also help AHJs by sharing your knowledge. “The inspector isn’t necessarily an expert in any one piece of equipment or how it functions or how it’s supposed to operate, so they rely on that expertise from you all,” says Narva. Solidify your company’s positive impact by looking into ways you might be able to help with training.

4. Ask for Help if Needed

If you have some doubts on a project, feel that certain requirements may be contradictory, or wonder if what you are recommending to a customer will be backed up by state codes, you should feel comfortable getting in touch with your AHJ to ask questions. If you have done your work well on the first three steps, this type of communication should come naturally out of a good working relationship with an AHJ.

Though the AHJ’s job as enforcer will require him to follow the rules to the letter, there is always room for inquiry and discussion. Narva says, “My philosophy as an AHJ was to find a way to say ‘yes.’ That doesn’t mean ignoring rules and regulations or lessening the standards, but through communication and offering potential alternatives, an AHJ can help you move forward with your project.”

Misunderstandings can happen and it is best to tackle them head-on. If a mistake has been made on your part, don’t be afraid to admit the error. “Don’t let misunderstandings develop and hinder your project,” says Narva. “If you don’t know or don’t understand then ask, but don’t try and hide the mistake.”

And if your AHJ relationship still has rough edges? Don’t be afraid to ask NAFED or your state association for a little help too. The larger group might be able to draw on its connections to advocate for your cause, find a resolution to a problem, or offer a non-partisan perspective to conflicting parties.