

## **Delivering Safety**

It's been said that when you give a family a fish, you feed them for a day. But when you teach a family to fish, you feed them for a lifetime.

The same principle applies when a fire department installs smoke alarms in a home. Such a visit can deliver lessons that will help protect that family for a lifetime. Hannah Comstock, Evaluation Specialist for Fireproof Children/Prevention First Company, recently "rode along" with Robert Ayers and William Johnson of the Rochester Fire Department's Community Relations & Education Unit. They were installing two KidSmart vocal smoke alarms for a city homeowner with preschool children, whom we'll call Mrs. Moore.

"Right from the beginning, Bob and Willie had rapport with the whole neighborhood," Hannah remembers. "As they got out of the Rochester Fire Department van, wearing their white shirts and badges, the neighborhood kids came running up. Every one of the children were eager to know: 'Are you coming to our house? They said not today, but we'd love to come see you another time!'"

At Mrs. Moore's house they introduced themselves, and their friendliness and respect quickly put her at ease. She invited them into her home. Over the next 45 minutes, they did far more than just install smoke alarms. They delivered the key information and preparation that help families stay safe from fire:

### **HAVE A WORKING SMOKE ALARM**

First, Bob showed Mrs. Moore the KidSmart Vocal Alarms they had brought, and explained how they work. Research has found that traditional smoke alarms don't always wake children. But most children do respond to their parent's voice.

### **PLAN YOUR ESCAPE ROUTE**

Next, the firefighters asked whether the family had an escape plan. Making the recording on the alarm helps parents really think about exactly how they and their children will get out of the home when the alarm sounds. That takes more than a top-of-the-head thought.

For example, Willie pointed out that the stairs in Mrs. Moore's house only lead out the front door. What if the family couldn't get out that way? Everyone needs to think about a second escape route.

Then Bob and Willie "role played" making a recording, with Bob pretending to be Willie's father. He demonstrated how to make sure the recording sounded urgent enough, and how to include important details about getting out and where to meet. Then Mrs. Moore recorded her own message.

## TEST YOUR BATTERIES REGULARLY

The firefighters installed the alarms in the ceilings of the children's rooms. They showed Mrs. Moore how the batteries went in and how to test the batteries. During their visit, they also tested the other smoke alarms already in the house. One, a particularly important alarm because of its location in the upstairs hallway outside the bedrooms, wasn't working because the battery wasn't pushed in all the way. They also tested the CO monitor.

## PRACTICE YOUR EXIT PLAN

Bob and Willie then talked with Mrs. Moore about the importance of practicing the family's escape plan. They suggested having a drill with her children at least twice a year. By asking specific questions, they helped her prepare for a real situation: "Now imagine they can't go out front. How would you drill them in an alternate plan?"

They suggested standing in front of the bedroom door during a drill and saying there's way too much smoke to go out this way, so that the family would practice going to a window. They also talked to Mrs. Moore about the importance of having doors on all of the bedrooms and keeping the doors closed.

They suggested having a towel in each bedroom, which could be put under the door to block smoke if necessary. Mrs. Moore was very grateful. She said she hadn't realized the importance of having an escape plan for every room, and practicing it, until she went through this process.

"They were both extraordinary," Hannah says of the firefighters' visit. "They showed true concern, were respectful, and made her feel she was doing the right thing."

Although both Bob Ayers and Willie Johnson are retiring this year, the important job of prevention and education will continue. Bob wants to continue to do community education work as a volunteer after he retires. Willie, who is the Rochester Fire Department's 2004 Firefighter of the Year, has already talked to the fire service in the Louisiana community where he is retiring about working as a volunteer.

And, in Rochester, Firefighter Willie Lightfoot has accompanied these two veterans on home visits, so he can learn and carry on their effective techniques for teaching families to stay safe.