



A Call to Arms for All Locksmiths

A dangerous change to the Arkansas fire code should unite all locksmiths — not just institutional ones.

By John Truempy, ICML, CRL, CMIL, IFDI

RECENTLY, I BECAME AWARE OF A CHANGE TO THE ARKANSAS FIRE CODE by an industry friend, Edward Marchakitus, that I believe is dangerous.

Ed sent me a message asking if I'd heard about a proposed fire code change in Arkansas. I hadn't been aware of it, but I found the information Ed was talking about on Lori Greene's blog (www.idighardware.com. Search "Arkansas Times"), which is one of the best sources on the Internet for code news and information. Her blog led me to a news story in an Arkansas newspaper

about a politician who was involved with the development of a product designed to protect schools against active shooters. It's one of the many barrier-type locking devices being proposed these days to "improve" classroom security cheaply. The problem with this type of contraption is that it's not your typical lock or exit device; users may not be familiar enough with the device in an emergency, causing it to be a fire hazard. Most of these devices are not permitted by the local fire marshal or authority having jurisdiction (AHJ).

The newspaper reported that the politician, who has a vested interest in one of these products, set out to have the fire code changed to allow these devices and increase sales to schools.

Now, a politician working the system for his own gain is nothing new; in fact it's become cliché, but that's not what outraged me. The change to the code is not only to allow these devices, but also to make it illegal for any fire marshal or code enforcement officer to not allow their use — and not only in schools, but also in other structures classified as an assembly occupancy.

The bill passed unanimously, even against the recommendation of the state's own fire marshal.

I can understand politicians would have a hard time voting against anything that's supposed to help protect children in an active shooter situation. On the other hand, I'm not happy with the rationale that suggests that because school fires are on the decline but active shooters are on the rise, this type of locking system can be used. Yes, school fires — and deaths from fires in schools — may well be decreasing but that's only because of decades of excellent fire code implemen-

tation and associated code enforcement.

The school resource officer and co-inventor of the product in question said, “The chance of having an active shooter and a fire at the same time is something I’ve never heard of.” My response to this ill-informed gentleman would be this: Have you ever heard of Columbine High School? That tragedy involved a firebomb to divert firefighters, propane tanks converted to bombs placed in the cafeteria, 99 explosive devices and bombs rigged in cars. The most killed in a school massacre was 44, with another 58 injured during the Bath School Disaster in Michigan in 1927. The killer in this incident was not an active shooter; he used bombs to cause his carnage.

Lori Greene also brought up another very important fact for her upcoming article for *Doors & Hardware* magazine: On just one day — March 19, 2015 — 16 school districts (including some involving more than one school) went into lockdown, which is a time when these barrier devices may have been used. This is not just a problem for people in Arkansas. The Ohio state senate also is considering a similar bill (Ohio SB125). It can also be expected that the companies that make and sell these barrier products will keep looking for ways to get around informed fire code officials and keep making attempts to change the local fire code.

A Numbers Perspective

The death of a child or young adult in any educational environment is always tragic, and strenuous, passionate debates about how to protect students and staff always follow in their wake. But it’s important to try to put the issues into perspective:

- The worst active shooter event in an educational environment was the Virginia Tech shooting, where 33 people were killed (Note: the shooter barricaded the fire doors himself to slow

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the police response and entrap people).

- The worst K-12 active shooter event was the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, where 27 were killed.

Unfortunately, fire has proven much more deadly, more often.

- Consolidated School New London, TX — 294 deaths
- Lakeview School Collinwood, OH — 175 deaths
- Our Lady of the Angels School Chicago, IL — 95 deaths
- The Cleveland School Kershaw County, SC — 77 deaths

I am not trying to imply that any kind of death is “better.” As you all know, school security has been a top priority my entire time as president of AIL. I just don’t think society should be trading one kind of tragedy for the threat of another by taking regressive steps in our life safety regulations.

Now for the call to arms.

Call to Arms

If you live in either Arkansas or Ohio, please reach out to your local representative and inform him or her of this situation. As president of AIL, I will be sending letters to the governors and key political

leaders of both states. But, as a voter, your contact will have much more impact.

Locksmiths are experts in these matters, and we must make it our mission to inform our institutions that we have proper and code compliant hardware to meet the need for life safety and the need for security in response to an active shooter situation.

My commercial brothers and sisters, you too should be spreading the word.

Tell the schools in your service area. Tell your friends. Tell every teacher and school employee you know. I hope to have an AIL-endorsed guidance document prepared for our members soon so that you can intelligently engage in any discussion regarding classroom security issues with politicians and employers alike.

As locksmiths, we are the experts. We can have an impact. Even if the companies that make and sell these barrier products manage to change the fire code through a few uninformed politicians in some locations, through our sharing of information, educational facilities will have the option to not choose this dangerous route. ☺



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a few years as a commercial locksmith and worked for the State of New Jersey at Trenton State Psychiatric Hospital. As the first president of ALOA Institutional Locksmiths (AIL), the ALOA SPAI division, he has over 15 years of association management experience. He has written many books focusing on both practical and esoteric applications for master key systems, including *Advanced Master Keying Skills* and *Master Key System Specification, Application & Management*. He also teaches both fundamental and advanced locksmith subjects.