PART 2: WHO SETS FIRES AND WHY?
“SEAN’S STORY”
TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING

- Curiosity/Experimentation.
- Crisis/Troubled/Cry-for-help.
- Thrill-seeking/Risk-taking.
- Delinquent/Criminal/Strategic.
- Pathological/Severely disturbed/Cognitively impaired/Thought-disordered.
Pathological

Delinquent/Criminal/Strategic

Thrill-seeking/Risk-taking

Crisis/Troubled/Cry-for-help

Curiosity/Experimentation
TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING (cont’d)

• Curiosity/Experimentation.
  – Boys/Girls — wide age span (2 to 17).
  – Lack of understanding of fire’s power.
  – Low impulse control.
  – Need to know about/explore environment.
  – Active learners.
  – Fail to think through consequences.
Curiosity-motivated firesetting is generally unintentional. What characteristics might an incident often include?
TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING (cont’d)

• Crisis/Troubled/Cry-for-help:
  – Firesetting is calling attention to a problem.
  – Youth may have poor coping/problem-solving skills.
  – Youth may have had a recent crisis or trauma.
  – Family dysfunction may be common.
  – Youth has access to ignition materials without supervision.
  – There may be a continuing series of firesetting.
TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING (cont’d)

– Fires are sometimes directed at specific targets/objects.
– Fire may be symbolic of what’s causing problems.
– Physical, psychological, sexual abuse are possible.
– Youth may use fire to express anger, sadness, frustration, powerless feelings related to stress or major changes in their life.
TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING (cont’d)

– May lie or make up a wild story about the fire’s cause.
– May ignore fire and lack remorse.
– Will continue to set fires until needs are identified and met.
– The crisis to the youth is based on their experiences, not those of the practitioner or parents.
– This typology of firesetting demands a rapid and integrated response from a team of professionals.
TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING (cont’d)

- Thrill-seeking/Risk-taking:
  - Experimenting for adrenaline rush with fire and “other” devices.
  - Adolescents fail to think through possible consequences.
  - Peer influenced; enjoy attention.
  - Easy access to fire tools and other materials.
TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING (cont’d)

- Adolescent may be afraid of consequences.
- May tell the truth if confronted in a respectful manner and presented with facts.
- Often embarrassed when caught.
- May try to extinguish the fire or summon help because their motive was not for the incident to get out of control.
• Delinquent/Criminal/Strategic:
  – Distinguished by motive of willful intent to cause destruction.
  – Targets are typically schools (after hours), abandoned buildings, open fields, dumpsters and abandoned structures.
TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING (cont’d)

– Criminal and strategic firesetters may use fire as crime concealment or for revenge.
– Youth may have troubling behavioral history.
– Probable other criminal issues.
- Incidents are often well-planned.
- Accelerants used with multiple points of origin.
- Fail to experience guilt for the fire they set.
- If left unchecked, these profiles have great potential for ascending to violent anti-social behavior.
• Pathological/Severely disturbed/Cognitively impaired/Thought-disordered:
  – Left unaddressed, youth firesetting behaviors can transcend into a pathology of continuing fire starts.
  – Pathological firesetting is very disconcerting because the perpetrator uses fire as a means for receiving gratification without regard to others.
  – These firesetters can ultimately set hundreds of fires.
May possibly have a high IQ but long history of disorders.
- Fires have distinct pattern and may be ritualistic.
- Firesetter denies or lies about involvement.
- Believe they are smarter than fire department or police department.
- May document fires.
TYPOLOGIES OF FIRESETTING (cont’d)

– May interject themselves into investigation.
– Firesetter has a long history of dysfunction.
– They have difficulty establishing relationships.
– Home abuse is possible.
– Family may have their own issues.
Just because a youth has a cognitive, behavioral or learning disorder, it does not necessarily mean that he or she is predisposed to set a fire or that the fire he or she set was caused by the disorder.
FIRE-RELATED CORRELATIONS:

• Households with few rules or consequences for inappropriate behavior.
• Smokers present in home.
• Lack of fire safety knowledge (youth/family).
• Lack of parental skill/supervision.
OTHER CORRELATIONS:

- Chaotic home environment/Lack of adult support.
- Substance abuse issues.
- Verbal, physical, sexual abuse.
- Multiple factors often involved in complex cases.
FOUR COMMON FACTORS OF ALL TYPOLOGIES:

• A failure of understand fire.
• Easy access to ignition materials.
• Lack of adequate supervision.
• Easy access to information on the Internet regarding firesetting, designing explosives and how to do tricks with fire.
FOUR COMMON FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE FIRESETTING BEHAVIOR (cont’d)
Solutions to firesetting behaviors:
- Aggressive primary prevention.
- Early identification, screening and intervention directed at the firesetter and his or her family.
- Cooperative support from parents/caregivers, the fire service, juvenile justice, social service, clinical and school communities.
SUMMARY

- Curiosity about fire is natural, firesetting is not.
- It is important to understand myths/facts related to firesetting.
- There has been an abundance of research conducted by the mental health community on youth firesetting.
SUMMARY (cont’d)

- Two key concepts of this unit:
  - Don’t get hung-up trying to identify a precise typology of firesetter.
  - Know when the situation is more than curiosity and needs referral to a partner agency.
“FOUR YEARS AFTER”