Prevention in Perspective
By Susan Phillips

For those who know or have had me in class, they realize I’m an Indiana transplant. I typically get comments regarding my southern accent. What many do not realize is that for a portion of my career I was a fire prevention officer on a military installation. As a matter of fact fire departments in military settings are called the Division of Fire Prevention and Protection. As a fire prevention advocate I really liked the emphasis that prevention played on the installation.

In addition to this assignment I was also a volunteer with the surrounding fire department. I recalled a time when we were discussing the benefits of whether fire crews should be doing fire prevention visits (aka inspections). My volunteer agency had just recently begun transition to a more paid than volunteer department and the paid firefighters “did not sign up to do fire inspections.” The firefighters on the installation had always had their share of visits to perform each month and I was trying to discuss the benefits of having the crews in the various occupancies on the installation. I remember one young firefighter who suddenly blurted out “Well you still have fire code violations in those businesses.” To which I replied, “Yes, but at least we know what they are.”

Fire Prevention Bureau activities have traditionally been viewed as a necessary evil of the fire service. Occasionally reserved for those who were on light duty or past their prime to remain on a suppression crew. The “crews” seldom felt any real benefit from prevention activities, since they were keeping them from fighting fires. But the reality was and is; is that fire prevention visits support the “Everybody Goes Home” focus that we are all trying to ensure.

My fire department is very fortunate in that we have had a working program with the local high school that allows seniors interested in fire service to “intern” during the school year. These young men and women actually become an important asset to the department by participating in training, calls and fire prevention and administrative activities. Getting a look at what really goes on during the day.

Because they serve a full school term, they accompany the firefighter/inspector as he did the routine visits which allow them to get into nearly every inspectable occupancy. They then come back and assist with the code review for reports as well as the data entry operation. This way they learned the importance of violation recognition and code enforcement. We have also been fortunate that a number of these young students have become some of our paid-on-call firefighters. On several occasions, they have commented how the fire prevention visits have assisted them in realizing what was where in a building.

Having firefighters participate in fire prevention visits is one way in which they become more familiar with the buildings in their service area. The visit program should be their opportunity to see what goes on in the various occupancies. Now undoubtedly they will argue that the inspectors should come back and share their visit information with them. That way they can concentrate on training and calls. To this I would argue, remember the Oreo Cakester commercial? Children at a summer camp see that Billy has an Oreo Cakester. This information
is passed down the long row of picnic table seated campers until the last one says “Bobby’s got his first chest hair?”

How can we make any surer that our firefighters truly understand what we are telling them regarding what is happening in a building? Some would argue that a camera is part of the Inspector’s toolbox. But again, can someone unfamiliar with a building really understand what the photo portrays? After all, “seeing is believing” or at best understanding.

The fire prevention bureau needs to be an integral link in the “Everybody Goes Home” initiative and as officers of all ranks we need to embrace the opportunity to get in buildings and see what is in there, where things are and make the fire prevention visit more than a seek and find for violations.

Remember when I told the young firefighter that while our installation buildings had violations and we knew where they were, we also knew where things like the alarm panel and utilities shut-offs were as well as any special operations that were conducted in the buildings. We knew approximately how many occupants we could possibly be dealing with during a call. We knew where the nearest hydrant was to the fire department connection, how far and exactly where we would lay a line and the best access to the structure. By performing fire prevention visits, the installation firefighters also knew who some of the contact persons were at the various buildings, which also helped during emergency response.

Fire prevention activities are integral to ensuring all our firefighters return to work on their next shift as training and protective equipment.