

## Working with AHJs: Some Tips for IKECA Members

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In April at the IKECA 2011 Annual Conference, I had the privilege of addressing IKECA members about establishing relationships with Authorities Having Jurisdiction

(AHJs) – those whose responsibility it is to ensure that you are qualified to do your job and that the work you do results in a safe environment that meets codes and other applicable requirements. Your Executive Director, Ken Hutton, subsequently asked me to put my suggestions into an article for your publication. This article combines my thoughts with input from the President of the National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM), Minnesota State Fire Marshal Jerry Rosendahl.

Interactions with AHJs are a necessary part of doing business, so putting some effort into developing a good relationship is simply good business. Four basic suggestions will put you on the course to success.

### Know and Abide by the Requirements Wherever Your Work Takes You

It would be great if the same rules applied in every jurisdiction where you do work. But you already know that is not the case unless all of your work is focused in a single metropolitan area. If you have jobs in different cities, different counties, or across state lines, you are likely having to deal with different provisions that have been adopted to address local needs. Find out and understand what is enforced in each jurisdiction.

Your State Fire Marshal's office is a good first stop if you are not sure which rules

apply in which jurisdictions. The State Fire Marshal should be able to give you a direction as to where to find the relevant information. In some cases a city or town in a state may be its own jurisdiction, and in other cases the state may be responsible for enforcement. Some states or jurisdictions may even have the information on their website for easy accessibility.

Also, find out what licensing or certifications or registrations you need to have, and obtain those credentials.

Being aware of the relevant codes and requirements in all the places your business takes you will go a long way toward establishing trust and demonstrating good faith to the local AHJ. Knowing the rules will put you and your AHJ on common ground in terms of what and how things need to be done. Rules and regulations are not intended to create unnecessary burdens, but rather to help ensure that there is adequate oversight of the project and that adopted codes and standards are met. Think of it as establishing a partnership with your fire protection professionals toward a common goal of public safety.

### Get to Know Your AHJ

The term "networking" may seem overused these days, but developing familiarity with your AHJ can help in establishing trust that can result in a higher quality and level of communication. Going to lunch together or working together on a community project (see the next tip) can work for your AHJ just as well as it works for clients and other business contacts.

Keeping the lines of communication open over time can have benefits both ways. You can certainly obtain information from the AHJ about what is required for you to do your job. But you can also keep your AHJ informed and educated about new technologies, techniques or

situations that can help the AHJ in doing his or her job more effectively. Sharing your knowledge is crucial, because inspectors are not necessarily experts in any one piece of equipment or how it functions, so they rely on your expertise.

Your investment in developing a good relationship from the beginning can also help if a problem crops up later and you need support from the AHJ. The process of working through challenges can go much more smoothly if a strong, positive foundation has been developed first.

### Get Involved in Your Community's Public Safety Efforts

Your AHJ will appreciate and remember any help you may be able to provide in community outreach on public fire safety education. A good and natural opportunity to help is Fire Prevention Week in October. So call up your local fire department and ask how you might partner with them. Help can be monetary, but putting in some volunteer time gives you face recognition and aids in developing that personal connection with code enforcement officials.

You also may want to get involved with sponsoring and participating in the activities of the local or state fire service organizations. They often have fundraisers, sports tournaments and activities with local burn centers throughout the year and always are looking for assistance. Remember: It's not always about money. Providing volunteer hours and education are more important than ever. Contact your State Fire Marshal or state fire service association and ask how you might help.

## Ask for Help if Needed, Accept Responsibility for Mistakes

If you have doubts or uneasiness about a particular assignment or situation, if you believe that a requirement cannot be followed to the letter for some reason, or if you have a question about how the code applies in a specific circumstance, do not hesitate to ask your AHJ for advice or help. If you have done your homework to this point and built up a good relationship during good times, then approaching the AHJ during difficult times should be easier.

When I was an AHJ, my philosophy was to find a way to say "yes." An AHJ's job as an enforcer is to make sure the rules are followed, but there is always an opportunity to inquire and discuss. Do not expect anyone to ignore the rules or relax the standards for you, but you can expect an AHJ to work with you to

explore potential alternatives to achieve the goal of public safety so that you can move forward with the job.

Speaking of challenging times, misunderstandings are bound to happen from time to time. Address them directly and without delay. Don't be afraid to admit an error that you have made; trying to ignore or hide the mistake will only delay your project.

If after trying all these suggestions you still find yourself struggling with your AHJ relationship, remember the excellent resource you have in IKECA. You should consider it a benefit of membership that you have an international association that can reach out on your behalf, and help you work through viable solutions to the issues you – and, undoubtedly, many of your peers – are confronting.

Budget shortfalls are leading to fewer code officials available to conduct inspections. It is more incumbent than ever on your industry to regulate itself by carrying out high-quality work, staying abreast of the requirements of your industry and keeping a solid connection with your State Fire Marshal as well as with your local AHJs. It is the best way to ensure that your business thrives while the safety of the public is ensured.

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*NASFM Executive Director Jim Narva is retired as Wyoming State Fire Marshal.*