

## Homeowner Engagement

For many of us, talking to homeowners about reducing risk in the Home Ignition Zone is a bit outside of our 'comfort zone.' If these conversations were easy, we'd all be doing it! Making the initial contact, and seeing it through to the end result isn't always easy, but it is always rewarding. It's a chance to make friends, so approach it that way!



From the Driveway In:

If you are arriving for a scheduled appointment, the homeowner will be looking for you. If you are doing a rapid assessment as a means of starting the conversation about reducing risk, you will need to set the stage with the homeowner. In either case, when you arrive you will be noticed.

- Make eye contact immediately, right from the start. Smile!
- Acknowledge them with an open hand, taking those first moments to gain situational awareness of your surroundings.

Be genuinely interested in their space and acknowledge their property pride - you are their guest!

- Find a conversation starter (is there a boat in the garage, a garden or something about which you can engage them to 'break the ice?')
  - Use this to build rapport
  - Talk about their interests - get a feel for their personality
  - Peel back the layers of the onion - learn about them

Look at what has been done, and work out from there. Everyone wants to do the right thing, and they may have been trying!

- Give knowledge, not just information
  - Be sure to give them credit for any work accomplished, even if the only 'work' is their willingness to let you give them input.
  - Educate them, they can learn
  - They need reassurance - and that is OK!

Spend the time to build trust, they are trusting you with their greatest investment!

- Approach the conversation knowing you will see them again
- Get past the “Official” relationship
- Build a friendship

The engagement often results in friendships between agency personnel and citizens. Wildfire mitigation is not unlike a remodeling project; significant time and money are invested. You have a chance to not only reduce their risk, but to change a lifestyle. It is very important to begin building a strong foundation from the time of the initial contact.

- Don't take short cuts so make the time in your schedule
  - Spend 2 hours if needed, judge the conversation

Start with their home, from the roof down. Keep it organized and easy to follow. Answer all questions to the best of your ability, and make sure to acknowledge them with interest. Remember they may be new to home hardening concepts, so LISTEN as well a talk.

- Use home hardening guides to explain their home envelope
  - Give attractive alternative examples for materials
  - Explain benefits of new materials (low maintenance, fire resistance)
    - Bring samples from local building supplier
    - New innovative materials - get samples mailed to you
  - No Jargon, use plain language

Survey their yard, their immediate surroundings. The condition of their yard is a good indicator of their sense of property pride.

- Be sensitive to their space
  - If the yard looks like a golf course green, ask to step out on it with them
    - Don't assume accessibility. If not needed then it will further build rapport
- Don't be negative about existing landscaping - provide alternatives positively!

Remember to understand the “give and take” perspective. This will be most apparent when discussing the trees on their landscape

- Concessions and compromise
  - Allow character trees, or legacy trees
    - “Grandmas” tree growing through the deck
    - Listen to the “story” - it is important to them
- Make suggestions based on what you can accomplish realistically and make your case with those compromises in mind.

Thank them for their time! Tell them you will follow up with them, and do it. One last compliment about their home, and be sure to wave as you leave. Smile!

“The probability that we may fall in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just.”

Abraham Lincoln

### **Homeowner Engagement Script**

Stakeholder: Hello Bill, great to see you! Wow, you really have a beautiful place here. Thanks for inviting me out to your home!

Bill: Sure. Glad you came. I do have to admit that I'm not too sure about this clearing of my property, and I do love the privacy I have here.

Stakeholder: You bet, I understand Bill, it really is beautiful here. Wow, you really have a nice shop. I bet you built that yourself. Say, is that fishing boat I see in there?

Bill: Yep, built it myself, touched every nail. That boat is my pride and joy. Had that thing for a long time, 15 years or so. Customized all the electronics myself.

Stakeholder: You sure did a nice job building that. Man that boat looks brand new, you really take care of that thing. How's the fishing been?

Bill: Pretty slow, been too hot for good fishing, plus the reservoirs are down this year from the drought. Caught a few bass last time I was out.

Stakeholder: Smallies?

Bill: Yep, couple nice ones. You sound like you wet a line once in awhile.

Stakeholder: Yep sure do, when I have time. Been busy lately though, the drought is causing a lot of issues. It is pretty dry around here, it makes us fire folks a bit nervous.

Bill: Nervous for what? That your job isn't it?

Stakeholder: Nervous that when our next wildfire happens, because it's a matter of when, not if, it's going to take a run at your neighborhood. The brush is pretty thick back there and it's pretty dry, and when it does, we don't have that many fire trucks or fire fighters for all these houses. That's pretty dangerous for all of us. We need your help before the fire starts.

Bill: Well I haven't seen fire back there behind my house in 20 years, not too worried about it. Besides I don't want to cut down my Mt Laurel.

Stakeholder: Well Bill remember the fires last fall? They were pretty hot and just over the ridge. Burned up the whole hillside. Besides, you know that Mt Laurel is pretty flammable stuff when it's dry. Pretty thick too. It sure would look nice growing in different clumps with some grass in between. Look just like a park back there.

Bill: Yea I remember those fires last year. Seems like that doesn't happen too often though.

Stakeholder: Well Bill, we put out most of the fires every year without you even knowing about it. Besides, you said you haven't seen fire for 20 years back there, don't you think that means it's probably due?

Bill: Well maybe I guess if you look at it that way. What do you think we could do?

Stakeholder: I think we could thin it out and make it look really nice, and then when the fire does come, it won't burn your whole property up or your house.

Bill: Not sure what that would look like.

Stakeholder: I have a spot to look at just down the road, one of your neighbors property. Let's go take a look, you'll like it.

Bill: I don't know. I have insurance anyway so if it all burns up I'll just leave anyway.

Stakeholder: Well Bill insurance doesn't always cover everything so I would check your policy. Besides you know you're not insuring the land so if your whole lot burns up you would be out of luck. Besides, wouldn't you want to stay here in this beautiful spot if you could do a few things to help protect it?

Bill: Well yea that is why I moved up here. But you said the fires would be bad up here.

Stakeholder: Sure the way it looks now, but if we reduce the amount of fuel back there the fire would not burn so bad. That's the great thing about this, we can change how the fire will burn. So you ready to go take a look at your neighbors?

Bill: Well I'll go take a look. Guess I didn't know anyone else around here was doing this kind of stuff around here.

Stakeholder: Yes there is Bill, and if you and your neighbors work together we can make a pretty big area that could really lessen the effects of fire back behind your houses.

Bill: Okay let's go take a look.....His property looks pretty good, way better than I thought it would. How much did this cost, I'm not a rich man you know.

Stakeholder: Bill, if I had some ways to help you with the cost to keep it reasonable would you consider looking at doing some work?

Bill: Ok, let's see what we can do.