
2017 Safety Award

Lt. Debra Thorson
Denver Fire Department

Nomination submitted by Sarah Moss

Lt. Debra Thorson is the Denver Fire Department's only full-time public educator. She can never be all the places she wants to be or teach all the people who request her classes or her expertise in reviewing safety plans. She has used force multipliers to overcome the limits of budgets, physics, and the space- time continuum. She truly exemplifies the STARS Safety award description of "creates and maintains a safe work environment by taking action which prevents injury or harm to self, others, equipment and/or property to protect our residents and employees." A few examples:

1. In recent years, the Denver Fire Department did not provide fire extinguisher classes for residents; buying and recharging fire extinguishers is costly and requires outdoors spaces for making a mess. Lt. Thorson found a solution: A BullEx laser-driven extinguisher training system. It simulates dry chemical or carbon dioxide fire extinguishers to allow people to learn in any indoor location. The BullEx training system is a cost-effective way to train more people in less time using modern, video-game-like technology and engaging hands-on activity. But how to purchase it?

Lt. Thorson saw a grant offered by the National Fire Protection Association. Even though she had never written a grant before, she asked for advice from others who had written grants, she tried something new, and she expanded her skill set by applying for the grant. While the National Fire Protection Association did not award DFD the grant, Lt. Thorson's application was so compelling that DFD purchased the BullEx training system with its budget. Lt. Thorson now takes the BullEx training system to the Mayor's Cabinet in the Community and other public events to train residents of all ages on the fire extinguisher technique of "PASS: pull, aim, squeeze, sweep."

2. Looking for advice on time management, Lt. Thorson enrolled in the Peak Academy Black Belt training. A quick look at her office wall demonstrates how she embraced the tools she learned: An impact/effort matrix helps her decide which project ideas to pursue. A production board shows her progress on tasks to do, tasks in process, and tasks completed. A list of questions helps her and her fellow officers determine if a business whose fire protection systems (such as sprinklers or alarms) are out of service will require a firefighter or other person to monitor the space on "fire watch." These questions support a consistent method of evaluation. Lt. Thorson models thoughtful, strategic decision making with an eye on safety for the public, firefighters, and property.
3. Lt. Thorson is a lifelong learner. She applied and was accepted to the very competitive FBI Citizens Academy, "an engaging six-to-eight-week program that gives business, religious, civic, and community leaders an inside look at the FBI." Deb attended these classes in the evenings on her own time at the FBI Denver field office and created relationships with other leaders in our community.
4. Lt. Thorson thinks big and understands the possibilities of partnerships in public safety. She is currently working with the nonprofit Colorado Emergency Preparedness Project to create a Facility Safety Administrator training and certification program. Its goal is to improve customer experience and protect life safety in the event of an emergency. There are almost 14,000

buildings eligible for this program, but there is no way for Deb to personally train each person in those buildings on emergency preparedness and evacuation procedures. She and her teammates are creating a wide-reaching training, giving building managers the tools they need to protect themselves and others in an emergency, whether they live here, work here, or are visiting our city.

Implementing this program has significant benefits for building owners, occupants, visitors, and first responders: With Standardized Fire Life Safety Plans (also called Emergency Action Plans), people in the building will know, and have practiced, what to do if the worst ever happens. Once a minimum of two primary Fire Safety Administrators have successfully completed this program, they may apply to have the building certified to receive a medallion showing that they are “Denver Fire Department Certified Prepared.” Each person who completes this course and its requirements will also earn a certification as a Facility Safety Administrator.

Denver is the first city in the country to offer a Facility Safety Administrator course this complete and of this importance. While it is tempting to say this program will be Lt. Thorson’s magnum opus, I suspect this project will lead her to dream even bigger and turn those dreams into projects with well-planned timelines, task lists, and evaluation metrics.

5. Our residents and business leaders can also testify to Lt. Thorson’s commitment. DFD routinely receives notes complimenting Deb and her work.

For these reasons, and many more, Lt. Deb Thorson is a star in promoting safety for our residents and employees. She deserves the honor of a 5281 Award for consistently going a step above.