



### ***Promoting Solar Panel Safety: How a fortunate meeting through Leadership Maryland led to improved training for Maryland's fire fighters***

Each year, Leadership Maryland escorts a class of up to 52 business, government, education and non-profit leaders on an eight-month educational journey across the state. A regular stop on the curriculum is the Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute (MFRI), the state's fire and emergency services training agency, headquartered at the University of Maryland in College Park, Md.

Tim Delehanty, facilities supervisor, gives each Leadership Maryland class a tour of MFRI's facility and explains how the organization is responsible for providing training to fire fighters and emergency medical service providers all across the state.

"Basically, I like to explain what MFRI does, and why our training is important," says Tim. "As the people who train fire emergency first responders, our work impacts everyone in our state."

In 2014, Tim was in the middle of his presentation to Leadership Maryland when a member of the class raised his hand to ask a question:

"What do you tell fire fighters about solar roof panels?"

The question came from Brian Lazarchick, who happens to be the safety director at Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative (SMECO), a customer-owned electricity provider to more than 160,000 services across Southern Maryland. Like Tim, Brian also provides safety training to the local public, including volunteer fire fighters.

"Volunteer fire fighters are often the ones responding to house fires, and they also might be the first people on the scene for downed power lines, so the SMECO safety team always tries to get to them to make sure they're safe," says Brian.

But over the previous year, as Brian and his team visited local volunteer fire departments throughout Southern Maryland, they often found themselves asked the same question: what should fire fighters do when they respond to a house fire and encounter solar panels on the home's roof?

"I had already started researching solar panels and working with my network to try to warn volunteer fire fighters of the safety hazards they pose," said Brian. "The fact is, there is no way to de-energize a solar panel. If a solar panel is exposed to any bit of light, it is going to generate electricity, and fire fighters have been electrocuted and killed when they've come into contact with a solar panel while responding to an emergency."

When Brian posed the same question to Tim, he acknowledged that while solar panels are becoming a pressing issue as more local homes install the technology, MFRI lacked the information they needed to properly teach fire fighters about the hazards of solar roof panels and how to safely work around them.

“When fire fighters respond to a house fire, they often climb onto the home’s roof to cut a hole to vent the fire. If there are solar panels on the roof, that’s going to affect how a fire fighter works. Also, fire fighters are always concerned about how much weight is placed on a roof, and the risk of that roof collapsing, and we weren’t sure how much weight solar panels typically add to a roof,” said Tim. “When Brian mentioned that his team had been working on similar training, I said that we needed to talk because maybe together we could put together a viable program.”

A few weeks later, Tim – who also happens to be a resident of southern Maryland – visited Brian and his team at SMECO. He toured SMECO’s new 5.5 megawatt solar farm and spent several hours learning about the typical structural features of solar panels and how solar energy systems work. Tim then took all that he had learned back to MFRI’s Institute Development Section, who put together an educational program that is now offered to fire fighters across the state.

“Essentially, we learned that as long as there is any kind of light getting to solar panels, they are collecting energy. As fire fighters, the only way we can really safeguard ourselves is to stay away from them while we’re operating, and make sure we don’t do anything that adversely impacts the system,” Brian says. “We’re teaching fire fighters to be ever mindful of the weight solar panels pose on the roof structure, and if there is any way possible, to leave solar systems alone and keep ourselves removed from them.”

“Together, we’ve created awareness training on the dangers of rooftop solar cells,” says Brian. “Tim is currently providing this training to fire departments throughout Maryland, and we are in the process of making the information available on the SMECO public website.”

Thanks to a fortunate meeting facilitated by Leadership Maryland, fire fighters across the state are now receiving improved training to better ensure their safety as they respond to emergencies.

To learn more about MRFI, please visit: [www.mfri.org](http://www.mfri.org).

To learn more about SMECO, please visit: [www.smeco.coop](http://www.smeco.coop)

To learn more about Leadership Maryland, please visit: [www.leadershipmd.org](http://www.leadershipmd.org).