



## Residential Fire Sprinklers Save Lives, Property

Whether you live in an apartment complex, a townhome or a single-family house, a well-maintained fire prevention system is vital to preventing unnecessary damage, injury and death.

According to the 2007 edition of the National Safety Council's "Injury Facts," an estimated 517,130 structure fires took place annually from 1999 to 2002 (excluding events of Sept. 11, 2001). These fires resulted in annual averages of 3,142 civilian deaths, 17,729 civilian injuries and \$8.6 billion in direct property damage.

Council data also shows that more than three-quarters of those fires occurred in residential occupancy structures. About 60 percent of the civilian injuries and nearly 50 percent of the direct property damage occurred in one- or two-family dwellings, while about 18 percent of fires, 16 percent of civilian deaths, 26 percent of civilian injuries and about 13 percent of direct property damage occurred in apartments or multifamily dwellings.

### The Benefits of Sprinkler Systems

Dan Gengler, Midwest regional manager of the Patterson, NY based National Fire Sprinkler Association Inc., said one way to prevent such devastation is to have a working smoke detector and a residential fire sprinkler system that, when activated, notifies a remote contact and the fire department.

Residential fire sprinkler systems have been around since the late 1970s and experienced a boom in the late 1980s. But in recent years, sprinkler system advocates have noticed an greater surge in awareness. Some factors contributing to this are more community efforts to enact residential codes, new installation and retrofit incentives, design alternatives, and education to combat myths, Gengler said.

Some people worry about possible water damage and other sprinkler myths, but the damage can be greater if a small fire is allowed to grow, he said. "The only picture of your greatgrandmother might be gone, instead of you just drying off the picture [if a sprinkler is activated]," Gengler said. "If the fire accelerates at any point, we're talking about people's lives being challenged."

The U.S. Fire Administration estimates that when sprinklers are present, the chances of dying in a fire are reduced by one-half to three-fourths, and the average property loss per fire is cut by one-half to two-thirds, compared with fires where sprinklers are not present. Together with smoke alarms, sprinklers cut the risk of dying in a home fire by 82 percent, relative to having neither. Seventy-four percent of home fire deaths between 1999 and 2002 occurred in properties without working smoke alarms.

### Residential Sprinkler Code Debate

While the majority of people agree efforts should be made to prevent fire fatalities in homes and multifamily dwellings, heated debate still surrounds whether to adopt a national building code that would mandate sprinkler systems be built or retrofitted in all one- or two-family residential buildings.

Roy L. Marshall is director of the Residential Fire Safety Institute, a consortium of the USFA, the National Association of State Fire Marshals and private-sector organizations. Marshall said the biggest single step for significantly reducing residential fires is through sprinkler system codes and legislation.

Members of the Washington-based National Association of Home Builders and other critics say issues



exist regarding affordability for low-income homeowners, reliability, installation requirements, maintenance and practicality in various climates.

Fire sprinkler advocates say adoption of a national code is only a few years away. Marshall likened the residential sprinkler system movement to that of the seat belt safety movement and predicted in the next year or two that at least 6 percent of the country will have sprinkler code requirements. Municipalities in 18 states have adopted residential sprinkler system ordinances in the last five to 10 years.

### **Fire Safety Tips For Apartment Dwellers**

Although newer buildings are likely to be equipped with sprinkler systems these days, some apartment seekers might find a number of older buildings in well-established neighborhoods are not. Here are some tips on what to know before signing a lease:

- Ask potential landlords what fire safety systems are in place and when they were last updated.
- Check if the hallways are cluttered. Newspapers and fliers are combustible materials.
- Ask if the wiring in the building is up to code.
- If a fire sprinkler system is installed, ask how often it is maintained. Apartment building fire safety systems should be tested by municipalities, and an inspection sheet near the system will indicate when it was last checked.

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