

Fire Sprinklers Save More Than You Think

As the Fire Chief of the Countryside Fire Protection District, it is important for me to respond to your March 28th front-page article, "Are sprinkler worth paying for in homes?"

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) reports that more than 3,000 people die each year from fire. Tens of thousands more are seriously hurt, coping with burn and smoke inhalation injuries for the rest of their lives. In 2002, 97 firefighters died in the line of duty and more than 80,000 others were injured.

Eighty percent of fire deaths occur in the home, most in single-family structures. At highest risk from fire are older adults and very young children who often have difficulty escaping a fire on their own.

Smoke alarms are essential, yet they can only detect a fire. Automatic fire sprinkler systems detect and then extinguish a fire. Fire sprinklers activate only at high temperature, over 135 degrees sensing the fire before it can reach a flashover stage. This is important because at flashover, everything in the room explodes in an intense fireball that blows out windows and spreads heat and toxic smoke throughout the building. People cannot survive in a flashover; even fully protected firefighters are at severe risk in a flashover. Fire sprinklers activate early on, operating one at a time as needed and control or extinguish a fire with less water than a single fire hose would. The result is not only saved lives, it is also significantly less water, smoke and fire damage.

I have held lifeless children in my arms, working to breathe life back into them. I have witnessed the agony of parents who have lost little ones. I have watched firefighters from our department and others risk their lives to rescue people trapped in their homes by fire. One such rescue occurred this past Christmas Day when a resident had to flee their home from the second floor as the fire exploded through their house.

During the last three years fire sprinklers in single-family homes in the Countryside Fire Protection District alone extinguished four fires, saving the lives of the occupants, not to mention the property value of the homes. These were not considered newsworthy events by the media and the public did not read about them. There were no news helicopters, photographers or reporters at the scene. Firefighters responded to these home fires and most were recalled before they ever arrived because in each case, the fire was already put out by a single fire sprinkler in the homes.

In addition to saving lives, preventing injuries and preserving property, fewer firefighters were tired up on the fires, allowing others to be available to respond instantly to the next emergency call. Fire sprinklers save lives and operation costs.

At a time when villages and fire districts are challenged by double-digit increases in personnel costs, revenue sources capped by the State and routine failure of tax referendum questions by an already overtaxed public, now more than ever is the time to require fire sprinklers in new homes. I encourage village and building officials to support the installation of fire sprinkler systems in new construction so we can prevent future loss of life of our residents and our firefighters and to reduce operating costs and fire loss insurance payouts.

James D. Spiegel, CFO
Fire Chief