

A Tale of Two Trump Tower Fires

Orland Park, IL (April 12, 2018) – On February 18, 2016, fire sprinklers controlled a fire in a trash compactor on the 50th floor of the Trump Tower in Chicago. The sprinklers prevented injuries, deaths and major damage to the building and its occupants, as well as, provided protection for responding firefighters. A tragically different outcome occurred April 7, 2018, when a fire on the unsprinklered 50th floor of the Trump Tower in New York City killed a 67-year-old man and injured four firefighters.

"The two Trump Towers reveal a glaring difference in protection between Chicago's and New York's new and old residential high-rises and the looming danger to those with substandard fire protection," said Tom Lia, executive director of the nonprofit Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board. "The Chicago and New York Tower fires, and their dramatically different outcomes, unmistakably point to the need for better life safety and property protection in high-rises."

Lia also noted the similarities between Trump Tower New York and another Chicago iconic high-rise – the building formally known as the Hancock Center. In both buildings, the commercial floors have installed fire sprinklers while the residential floors do not.

Two separate kitchen fires occurred at the Hancock building on February 18, 2018. One fire began on the 52nd floor; the other on the 69th floor – both residential floors. Both resulted in significant damage. A 32-year-old man was severely injured in one of the fires. In addition, two years ago, five people were injured when a candle caused a fire in a bedroom on the unsprinklered 50th floor of the same building. The fire caused significant damage and displaced residents for months.

In Chicago, fire sprinklers were required in all high-rise buildings built after 1975. The requirement came much later in New York City. In 1999, after two fatal apartment tower fires, the city required fire sprinklers in all new high-rise buildings. In both Chicago and New York, existing residential high-rise buildings were exempt.

Following a 2003 fire at the Cook County Administration building in Chicago where six people died, the city passed an ordinance that required all commercial high-rise buildings be retrofit with fire sprinklers. All residential high-rise buildings were required to retrofit with fire sprinklers or comply with the city's Life Safety Evaluation (LSE.)

According to Lia, Chicago's LSE ignores the national model codes adopted by the state of Illinois and has allowed older buildings to pass the evaluation without being protected with fire sprinklers.

"A building using the Chicago LSE with a passing score does not necessarily mean that the building is 'safe,'" said Lia. "When sprinklers are not required, Chicago's LSE basically writes off the people in the room of origin."

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Trump Fire
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On December 10, 2009, a fire on the 36th floor of the building at 260 East Chestnut, Chicago, claimed the life of an 84-year-old woman and injured 12 others. Prior to the fire, this building passed the City of Chicago LSE.

Lia said there are still dozens of unsprinklered residential high-rises in Chicago, even though the deadline to comply was January 1, 2015. The city has begun addressing noncompliant buildings in court proceedings.

“A high-rise without fire sprinklers is not a safe place to live,” said Lia “That’s why more than 85 older residential high-rises in Chicago have committed to retrofit their buildings with fire sprinklers. New high-rises with installed fire sprinklers and older high-rises that have been retrofitted are the most fire-safe buildings. What should be of interest to the building owners is that sprinklered high-rises are also the most marketable to safety-conscious buyers and renters.”

About the Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board (NIFSAB)

NIFSAB is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting progressive legislation, raising public awareness, and educating code officials and governmental policy makers by demonstrating the proven performance of fire sprinklers in saving both lives and property. For more info, visit www.firesprinklerassoc.org.

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