

Smoke detectors: Proper care is the key

Written by Patricia Gay
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When it comes to a house fire, every second of delay could cost a life.

The earlier the fire department is alerted the better, according to Weston Fire Marshal John Pokorny, who is also the town's fire chief.

In light of last year's tragic Christmas morning fire that cost five people their lives in Stamford, Mr. Pokorny said now is a good time for Westonites to make sure their smoke detectors are up to date in order to prevent a similar tragedy here. "Every house needs smoke detectors and they need to be in working order," he said.

Saving lives

Smoke detectors save lives. Almost two-thirds of home fire deaths resulted from fires in homes with no smoke alarms or no working smoke alarms, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA).

"When there is a fire, smoke spreads fast and smoke detectors sound off an alarm and give people time to get out," Mr. Pokorny said.

Most people are killed in fires by inhaling smoke and toxic gases, not from burns; and most deaths and injuries occur in fires that happen while people are asleep.

Because newer homes — those built since 1985 — are required by law to have smoke detectors, many homeowners feel they are protected, but Mr. Pokorny said that isn't necessarily the case.

"Smoke detectors need to be completely changed every 10 years. They get dirty from smoke and such, especially those near kitchens or in a house with smokers. There is a sender and receiver on the detectors, and when the sender and receiver don't see each other anymore that's when the alarm goes off. When the detector is dirty it goes off easier," he said.

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Alarms should be tested once a month by pushing the test button on the detector. If a smoke detector hasn't been tested lately, it may not be working and that could prove fatal.

In the Stamford fire, it took the fire department just six minutes to respond to the call once it was received, but by then it was too late for five of the home's occupants, including three children, who perished. The Victorian-style house had recently been renovated but did not have working smoke detectors.

"Early detection is what gets you out of the house," Mr. Pokorny said.

There are two types of smoke detectors. An ionization smoke alarm is generally more responsive to flaming fires, and a photoelectric smoke alarm is generally more responsive to smoldering fires. For the best protection, NFPA recommends a combination ionization and photoelectric alarm (also known as a dual sensor alarm).

Placement

The placement of smoke detectors is important, too. A home should not have just one. They should be installed in every bedroom, outside every sleeping area, and on every level of the home, including the basement. Because smoke rises, detectors should be mounted high on a wall or on the ceiling. All smoke alarms should be interconnected so if one goes off they all go off.

Proper maintenance is key. When smoke alarms fail to operate, it's usually because batteries are missing or disconnected. "Batteries should be replaced at least once a year. If an alarm starts 'chirping' that is a sign the battery is low and should be replaced right away. Also, if an alarm reacts to smoke with a low soft tone, that means the detector is old and should be replaced. The sound coming from the detector should be a loud alarm. If it isn't, the detector has lost its usefulness," Mr. Pokorny said.

Because homes should also have carbon monoxide (CO) detectors, Mr. Pokorny said consumers can buy alarms that are combination smoke and CO detectors. "The combination detectors are great because they're just one device to take care of, just one thing on the wall,"

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he said.

For those who are deaf or hard of hearing, there are smoke alarms that vibrate and have strobe lights. There are also wireless detectors available that when one alarm goes off, all the detectors in the home go off. "Those are good, especially for larger houses," Mr. Pokorny said.

Woods End house fire

At the end of March, a fire destroyed much of an unoccupied house on Woods End Lane in Weston. The fire department received a call from workers at the town's transfer station, who reported seeing a large plume of smoke in the area.

"That home had a great fire detector system but it wasn't connected to an alarm company so it didn't notify anybody. Small problems can turn into big problems if they go undetected," Mr. Pokorny said.

If a person is trapped in a room during a fire and can't get out, Mr. Pokorny said they should pack the bottom of the door with clothing or damp towels to keep smoke from going in the room, and call 9-1-1 and say where they are. He said portable emergency ladders, which some homes have, usually aren't very helpful.

"A fire can happen any time of day or night, when people least expect it. The ladders aren't easy to use and are difficult for some people, especially young children to handle. You certainly couldn't carry a baby or anyone on a portable ladder," he said.

But the key to any fire prevention plan is adequate alarms and detectors. "There's no reason not to have a working smoke detector. If anyone is unable to afford a detector or the batteries they can call the Weston Volunteer Fire Department and we'll get them one. We're here to help," Mr. Pokorny said.

The fire department's non-emergency number is 203-222-2647.