



News Release  
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## **Changing Minds and Changing "Heads"**

CHICAGO—Sprinkler systems, in particular the sprinkler "heads," have changed and improved over the past 30 years; now they can even match the décor of a room. Although the application and technology of fire protection have increased, the utilization of sprinklers is not at the level public officials, tenants, and fire protection proponents believe it should be in order to protect the lives of building occupants. Much remains to be accomplished to collectively change the mindset of building owners, even homeowners about the need for comprehensive fire protection measures. "It's shocking to think that fire sprinklers have been around since 1874 when an American, Henry S. Parmalee, invented and used sprinklers in his piano factory, yet so many buildings throughout the U.S. lack sprinkler systems, over 800 high-rises in Chicago alone," said Brian Conway, Head of Fire Protection for Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating. The National Fire Protection Association and the United States Fire Administration both assert that a fire sprinkler system is the most effective means for fire loss prevention and reduction. A significant deterrent has always been the cost of fire protection installation. But new advances in fire protection technology have created more affordable myriad of options to minimize property damage and loss of life from fire.

Fire protection products currently in the marketplace range from building materials to office furniture and clothing, labeled "fire-resistant," "fire-proof," "fire-retardant," or "heat-resistant." Most of these products are considered passive fire protection because they are used to resist, retard or isolate a fire and the associated smoke and fumes; they do not in themselves extinguish a fire. For example, a chemical coating can be applied to building materials like wood to prevent fire from penetrating the walls and ceilings, further fueling the fire and spreading to adjoining rooms. Automatic fire sprinklers are active fire protection that can extinguish a fire or keep it at a more controllable level to assist fire

fighters. Passive fire protection measures should be used in combination with fire sprinklers.

The advantage of fire sprinklers over passive fire protection and other means like fire extinguishers is that they are automatic and serve a dual purpose. No one needs to see the fire and be present in the building for the sprinklers to work. And 60 seconds after one sprinkler head is activated in a building an alarm is triggered to alert the local fire department. This combination is critical in fighting fires and saving lives.

In an article written by former California State Fire Marshal Ronny Coleman for "Sprinkler Age," he refers to "the missing minutes" in the cascade of events during a fire. The missing minutes is the delay of awareness of a fire experienced by the fire department. Seldom is a fire observed in the first couple minutes of ignition. Most of the time, fires are totally out of control before anyone is aware of them. He states, "The most important period of time with regard to containment of fire is for the fire to be noticed and the alarm to be sent before the fire reaches a high challenge stage and begins to consume lives and property at almost logarithmic stage." Sprinkler systems are crucial in alerting firefighters of a fire and either extinguishing a fire or containing the fire so it is at a controllable level when firefighters arrive on the scene.

Until the late 1940s, sprinklers were primarily used for property protection in warehouses and factories. Following catastrophic fires claiming many lives, such as the Coconut Grove Nightclub fire in Boston that left 492 dead and the LaSalle Hotel fire in Chicago with 61 casualties, public officials proposed automatic fire sprinklers for a means to provide life safety for building occupants, because of the good life safety record for sprinklered buildings and factories. Since that time, sprinklers have been found to cut the chance of death and average property loss by one half to two-thirds.

Now, building owners, including high-rise residents, can purchase fire protection systems while gaining cost-savings. New technology has created more affordable systems. Extended coverage sprinkler heads are more cost-effective because the system uses fewer heads to distribute water to a larger area. Flexible drop systems allow owners or tenants more flexibility to make changes to fit their needs after a sprinkler system is installed, thereby decreasing labor and material costs necessary for

changes to non-flexible systems. Plastic pipe is also a new alternative in sprinkler systems that costs less than traditional metal pipe systems. Although Chicago city codes do not allow plastic pipe, proposed code changes soon to be voted on will allow it, as the national building code currently does.

Owners can also save money through trade-offs, or design alternatives. Most building codes permit trade-offs because of the superior protection afforded by sprinklers. For example, if a sprinkler system is installed in a hotel, the owner may have reduced fire-resistant requirements for structural components and furniture, and could reduce the number of fire alarms by placing them in the hallways instead of in each room. Reduction in these requirements results in savings, and coupled with insurance savings can offset the cost of sprinkler systems.

Many building owners have realized the benefits of fire sprinklers and have opened their checkbooks to make their buildings safer for occupants. Currently, Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating is retrofitting sprinkler systems in the Harrison Conference Center, Our Lady of the Resurrection Hospital, and office buildings at 55 E. Monroe, 1 E. Whacker, and 625 N. Michigan, to name a few. In addition, the company is installing fire protection in new facilities such as the Soldier Field parking garage, 55 E. Eerie condominiums, Pinnacle Tower, and the Hyatt Hotel at 71 S. Whacker.

Established in 1946, Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating Company is a full service mechanical contracting firm specializing in complex plumbing, mechanical piping, and fire protection. Great Lakes employs over 300 people from its Chicago office at 4521 W. Diversey Ave.

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