



News Release

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When Employee Lives Are on the Line

CHICAGO – Fires and explosions at the workplace kill 200 people and injure more than 5,000 annually, according to OSHA statistics. Property owners often make the decision not to install firesprinklers in their buildings due to the costs involved – potentially putting their employee lives at the mercy of workplace budgets. Yet, when employees are injured or killed in business-related fires, the repercussions for the business or property owner are tragic and far-reaching, including possible wrongful death suits and expensive insurance claims, not to mention the distress and suffering of the victim and his or her family.

“Sprinklers involve some upfront costs, but they mean major savings for employers in the long run,” said Brian Conway, Executive Vice President of Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating Company. “They prevent loss of life, lawsuits, expensive repairs and lost business hours. Many insurance companies offer discounts on premiums for policies on sprinklered buildings. And there is federal legislation pending that will allow building owners to recapture the cost of installing fire sprinklers through tax relief.”

No business, big or small, is safe from the devastation of fire. When a high-rise fire broke out Oct. 17, 2003, in the Cook County Administration Building in Chicago, six people died and many others were injured. According to an Associated Press article, Cook County Public Guardian Patrick Murphy said, “It was a contained fire. No one should have died.” But even a contained fire can entail loss of life – three employees from his office died in the blaze. The article went on to state that one of the factors that contributed to the loss of life was a lack of sprinklers above the ground floor.

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High-rise fires pose great difficulties when it comes to saving those in danger. Vincent Dunn is retired deputy chief of the Fire Department of New York, and on his website, www.vincentdunn.com, he explains the problems involved with high-rise rescues. He mentions that when buildings are constructed beyond the reach of a fire department's highest ladder, "Searches and rescues can be accomplished only from inside stairways. People trapped at windows, when flames are between them and a stairway will have to jump or burn to death."

Dunn also comments on the number of firefighters it takes to control a high-rise fire, so that more people are not endangered. "To successfully contain a high-rise fire to one floor and not kill large numbers of occupants attempting to escape, it takes 40 to 50 firefighters using a rapid-response, blitz attack. If this fails, it will take another 100 to 200 additional firefighters to control the fire and keep it from spreading to adjoining buildings. If a community does not have such a large number of firefighters available, then every high-rise must be fully protected with an automatic sprinkler system."

One type of employee is at extremely high-risk during a blaze: the actual firefighters. According to Mr. Dunn, a 10-year study of the deaths of firefighters revealed that 113 firefighters died nationally during that time from being caught or trapped inside of a burning structure. The victims could not escape the buildings and were overcome by flames, heat or smoke.

The National Fire Sprinkler Association, North Illinois Chapter, cites examples where the timely activation of fire sprinklers in commercial buildings helped save employees and firefighters from harm.

In November 2003, the Fire Protection District of Lemont, Ill., responded to an alarm in an 80,000 square foot warehouse. A fire had started in the electrical equipment room, but the sprinklers had it extinguished before the firefighters arrived. "This is yet another perfect example of the life safety and property preservation benefits of fire sprinkler systems," said Jeffrey G. Lehr, Director of Fire Prevention. "The outcome of this incident would have been entirely different without the fire sprinkler system, which includes the untold measure of safety that sprinklers provide to the firefighters that must enter these buildings."

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In October 2003, an emergency lighting unit malfunctioned at a medical office in Evanston, Ill., and caused a blaze. Two sprinklers activated and doused the fire. Staff and patients were successfully evacuated from the building. “Without the sprinklers, the fire would have surely done more damage and smoke would have permeated the entire floor,” said Evanston’s Chief John Wilkinson. The building reopened the next day.

The federal government has a law in place to protect its employees from death by fire while traveling. Congress passed the Hotel and Motel Fire Safety Act of 1990, which states that federal employees must stay in public accommodations with smoke detectors and a sprinkler system. It also states that federally funded meetings and conferences cannot be held in properties that do not comply.

“The Hilton and Marriott hotel chains require all their hotels to be sprinklered,” said Mr. Conway. “We’ve worked with them on projects. They want to make sure their employees and guests are well-protected. We’re always willing to work with businesses to see how they can best protect their employees from fire – even if it means installing the sprinklers at night, so we won’t be in anyone’s way during work hours.”

Sprinkler installation may mean adding yet another expense to the budget, but in the long run, it is an investment no business can afford to overlook. “You can’t put a price on peace of mind – or human life,” said Mr. Conway.

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 regularly works with businesses to retrofit their structures with the life-saving sprinkler systems they need. They have retrofitted some of the most prominent office buildings in Chicago, including the One First National Plaza, Harris Trust and Savings Bank, John Hancock Building, Amoco Building and the Prudential Plaza Buildings.

Great Lakes employs over 300 people from its Chicago office at 4521 W. Diversey Ave. To find out more, visit their website at www.glph.com or call (773) 489-0400.

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