

News Release
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Setting the Record Straight on Fire Sprinkler Misconceptions

CHICAGO – Businesses have various reasons for not wanting to install appropriate fire sprinkler protection. Some are concerned about the amount of water damage an activated sprinkler will create. Some worry that sprinklers will go off by accident. Others think that partial sprinkler protection is good enough. And, still others think a sprinkler dousing will destroy their computers. But, despite these misconceptions and worries, fire sprinklers remain the best bet for putting out a blaze with minimal damage from fire or water.

According to Brian Conway, Executive Vice President of Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating Company, most of these concerns are never an issue. “The individual sprinklers are heat-activated, and when the heat of a blaze raises the temperature of a sprinkler to the activation level – usually 165 degrees – water will be released directly above the source of the heat,” he said. “Because they operate in the region of the fire’s origin, they help to keep fires small by controlling or dousing them in their early stages.”

Mr. Conway added that each head of a sprinkler system is independently controlled. “It’s not like on TV,” he said. “On sitcoms, when one sprinkler head goes off, they all go off. In real life, each one has an individual heat-detecting element.”

According to the National Fire Sprinkler Association, Inc. (NSFA), the odds of accidental discharge of fire sprinklers due to mechanical defect have been found historically to be extremely low – “on the order of one per year per sixteen million sprinklers in use.” They

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add that automatic sprinkler systems and other system components are tested and listed by Underwriters Laboratories and Factory Mutual Research Corporation to make sure they are not prone to leakage. The NSFA reports that the amount of water released by sprinklers is minimal compared to that vented by fire hoses: “The amount of water which is put on a fire by fire department hoses in an unsprinklered building fire is nearly always tens to hundreds of times more than that which sprinklers would have discharged.”

“What You Should Know About Sprinkler Systems,” from Independent Insurance Agents & Brokers of America, has this to say about fire sprinklers: “A basic premise of proper sprinkler protection is that sprinklers be installed throughout all building areas. Partial sprinkler protection is a game of chance, since a fire originating in an unsprinklered area can overpower sprinklers once given a head start.”

The dangers of incomplete fire sprinkler installation are best illustrated by the example of a February 23, 1991 fire in Philadelphia, Penn. In the 38-story high-rise, service floors located below grade had sprinkler protection at the time of construction, and sprinklers had been installed on several floors during renovations, including all of the 30th, 31st, 34th and 35th floors, and parts of floors 11 and 15. Limited service sprinklers were installed on part of the 37th floor. But a fire broke out on the 22nd floor – and it raged until it reached the fully sprinklered 30th floor. Ten sprinkler heads activated at different points of fire penetration, and the blaze was eventually stopped.

Worries about sprinklers in computer rooms are understandable, since electricity and water make a bad combination. Water-free options for fire control are available, but should be accompanied by sprinkler back-up. When fire strikes, the first priority must be to save the employees. A computer is easier to replace than any human life.

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In the article “The Chicago Tragedy” by Francis L. Brannigan, SFPE, in Fire Engineering, December, 2003, Mr. Brannigan gives this example of a computer room that did not have adequate fire protection: “Computers in the Pentagon were in an area under renovation. A guard was given a CO2 extinguisher, to avoid water damage. A light bulb set fire to the combustible tile ceiling. The extinguisher, as you would expect, was ineffective. The fire destroyed the computers and collapsed the concrete floor above.”

“All the newer high-rises have sprinklers in their computer rooms,” said Mr. Conway. “Great Lakes does offer water-free systems, such as the Ecaro-25 fire suppressant system that uses pentafluoroethane, for companies that want that option. But fire departments prefer that such systems have sprinkler back-up. If there’s a fire, the detection system can activate the water-free system first, and if that doesn’t do it, the sprinklers will.”

Sprinklers may be a misunderstood device, but they offer maximum protection from the ravages of fire. “Once you learn all the facts, it’s easy to see that sprinklers are a low-maintenance, reliable investment in any building’s safety,” 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. For the past 20 years, their night crews have been installing sprinkler systems at night, so that their work would not disturb daytime business operations. 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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