

News Release
For Immediate Release
Date: March 10, 2004
Contact: Mark McLaughlin
Nehlsen Communications
309-736-1071
mark@ncpr.com



High-Rise Isn't the Only High-Risk

CHICAGO, Ill. – Fires in high-rise structures have received much media attention over the past six months. But such fires aren't just limited to high-rises – they occur in buildings of every size and shape, with lives frequently hanging in the balance. From a blaze starting in the dryer of a retirement home to flames roaring to life within the confines of an office complex, a dormitory, or a busy hospital, these buildings, and those who occupy them, need the protection offered by fire sprinklers.

Increased public awareness regarding the importance of sprinklers has resulted since the Oct. 17, 2003, high-rise fire in the Cook County Administration Building in Chicago which resulted in the deaths of six people and injuries to several others. Presently, a new sprinkler ordinance is before the Chicago City Council that would require sprinkler retrofitting commercial and residential buildings built before 1975 without fire protection. Current sprinkler ordinances in Chicago dictate that all high-rise buildings built since 1975 are required to have fire sprinkler systems. The Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board states that there are about 800 high-rise buildings in Chicago, both commercial and residential, without fire sprinklers. And, fires in high-rises are indeed a peril which must be addressed – but high-rises aren't the only buildings where people gather.

“A fire can happen anywhere, yet some people have an ‘it-can't-happen-to-me’ attitude about their own safety,” said Brian Conway, Executive Vice President of Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating Company. “Sprinklers may mean an additional investment, and that figures into people’s attitudes. But that expense is minimal, compared to the far greater cost of repairing a building devastated by fire. And when it comes to safety, you can't put a cost on a human life.”

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“You’ve probably never read in the newspaper about incidents where a single sprinkler saved lives and property,” said Mr. Conway. “When it comes to fires, the media only report on cases of extensive property damage or loss of life. If it weren’t for sprinklers, you’d be seeing a lot more fire-related tragedies. Still, there are a lot more buildings out there that need protection – that’s where we come in. We’ve installed sprinkler systems in schools, as well as community buildings and apartments with single-room occupancies, where people smoke and cook in their rooms. We’ve also installed sprinklers in seven of the enlisted quarters at Great Lakes Naval Base—with occupancies between 500 and 1,000 each. Even military personnel need protection, when it comes to fire.”

As Mr. Conway explains it, when a fire breaks out in a room protected by a sprinkler system, the sprinkler closest to the fire is activated, showering the blaze. The number of sprinklers activated depends on the size and area of the fire. Sprinkler systems are usually superior to traditional fire-fighting methods in that they can reach and extinguish the fire first. Plus, the amount of water released by sprinklers is much less than that released by fire hoses. According to the Scottsdale Report, a 15-year study of fire sprinkler effectiveness, a sprinkler uses an average of 341 gallons of water to control a fire. Firefighters use an average of 2,935. Reduced water damage is a major source of savings when sprinklers have been installed.

The National Fire Sprinkler Association, North Illinois Chapter, cites numerous examples where successful activations of fire sprinklers in commercial and residential buildings helped to minimize fire damage and extinguish blazes in their early stages.

In February 2000, the fire department of Northbrook, Ill., received an alarm at 8:52 p.m. and arrived at a large office complex at 8:56 p.m. – and found that the fire had already been extinguished by the sprinkler system. Only two sprinkler heads had activated. The source of the fire was determined to be the careless use of smoking materials.

In March 2001, a fire was contained to the closet area of a student room in a college residence hall in New London, NH. According to Fire Chief Peter Stanley, the fire was controlled by the quick activation of the fire sprinkler system.

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In January 2003, a fire began in a dryer at a nursing home in Orland Park, Ill. A single fire sprinkler prevented the fire from spreading through the home, which is the residence for 249 seniors. Firefighters from Orland Fire Protection District were able to extinguish the remaining fire with a dry chemical extinguisher.

In October 2003, fire broke out at Stroger Hospital of Cook County on the 7th floor of the Medical and Surgical Unit. The blaze began in bedding materials and one report indicated that it may have been caused by a patient smoking. Sprinklers in the room contained the fire. No injuries were reported. The sprinklers in Stroger Hospital had been installed by Great Lakes Plumbing and Heating Company.

These examples illustrate how in some cases, the activation of a single sprinkler head was all it took to prevent possible tragedy. None of the buildings involved were high-rise structures, but all were facilities with large numbers of residents, employees or customers. Such incidents stress the importance of retrofitting sprinkler systems into older buildings which had not been built with that safety feature.

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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