

Fire Sprinkler Board Concerned About Recent Misinformation Surrounding Home Fire Sprinklers

Orland Park, IL (July 30, 2013) – Tom Lia, executive director of the nonprofit Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board, is working to get the facts straight about home fire sprinklers in relation to the Illinois State Fire Marshal’s June 28th filing of rule changes to update the state fire code, NFPA 101: Life Safety Code. The code update would include fire sprinkler requirements in new construction one- and two-family homes across the state of Illinois.

Misinformation about home fire sprinkler costs and the supposed fire safety of today’s new homes is currently circulating among home builders and their associations, REALTORS® associations, and elected officials. “Unfortunately, these groups are making false claims in press releases, letters to their members and constituents, and on their websites about the costs of installing home fire sprinklers, claiming they cost tens of thousands of dollars more per home than actual completion costs and will price homebuyers out of owning new homes,” noted Lia. “However, we have received actual costs from contractors who have recently completed projects in Illinois and the cost averages \$2.38 per sprinklered square foot.

In fact, a recent report from the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) counters the organization’s stance that fire sprinklers which add approximately 2% to building costs will price homebuyers out of new homes. Their report states that homebuyers can now afford to pay 23% more for a new home than a property built before 1960 and still maintain the same amount of first-year annual costs.¹

The arguments that today’s modern homes are safer due to smoke alarms and better construction practices are debatable. The nonprofit National Fire Protection Association reports that 84 percent of residential fire deaths occur in one- and two-family homes.⁴ While smoke alarms are an important piece of the life-safety equation, they can only alert occupants to smoke. Fire sprinklers work to control or even extinguish a fire, allowing occupants to escape. A UL study showed that the lightweight engineered wood systems in today’s homes actually burn faster and fail sooner than the dimensional lumber systems in older homes.² In addition, today’s homes are filled with synthetic and/or petroleum-based furnishings that burn hotter and faster. A second study compared two identical rooms, one contained modern furnishings and the other contained legacy furnishings. The modern room transitioned to flashover, the temperature at which everything suddenly ignites in flames, in three-and-a-half minutes and the legacy room in 29-and-a-half minutes.³

All the model building codes recognize residential fire sprinklers as the least expensive offset to less fire resistant modern construction technology and there are already 91 Illinois communities that agree. If IL is successful in adopting the new Life Safety Code it will join California and Maryland as the leading states in residential fire safety. “We support the state fire marshal and members of the Illinois fire service, especially the firefighters who risk their lives every time there is a fire call,” states Lia. “It’s time for people to hear the facts and quit being plagued with misinformation.”

¹ “NAHB: Homebuyers Can Afford Higher-Priced Homes,” *HousingWire*, April 1, 2013.

<http://www.housingwire.com/news/2013/04/01/nahb-homebuyers-can-afford-higher-priced-homes-0>

² “Structural Stability of Engineered Lumber in Fire Conditions,” UL.

<http://www.ul.com/global/eng/pages/offering/industries/buildingmaterials/fire/fireservice/lightweight/>

³ “Impact of Ventilation on Fire Behavior in Legacy and Contemporary Residential Construction,” UL.

<http://www.ul.com/global/eng/pages/offering/industries/buildingmaterials/fire/fireservice/ventilation/>

⁴ “Home Structure Fires,” NFPA, April 2013. <http://www.nfpa.org/research/statistical-reports/occupancies/home-structure-fires>

###

NEXT PAGE: See the home fire sprinkler fact sheet for additional information.