



Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board

Save Lives. Protect Property.

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It's Time to Retire Grandfather Clauses

Orland Park, (July 20, 2018) – The massive, fast-moving fire in Prospect Heights on July 18th that spread to three buildings and left more than 100 families displaced stands as a convincing reminder of the value of fire sprinklers and their important role in today's codes.

The buildings were not protected with fire sprinklers because they were built before codes required them and were therefore “grandfathered”.

If fire sprinklers had been installed in the building, heat from the fire would have activated the closest sprinkler within seconds, automatically controlling the fire or putting it out. The damage would have been limited to the room of origin. Because it wasn't sprinklered, the fire was able to grow and spread.

“It is a relief that there were no deaths or severe injuries in this extensive fire,” said Tom Lia, Executive Director, Northern Illinois Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board (NIFSAB). “Nevertheless, more than 100 families have lost all of their belongings and their homes. There may have been an even more tragic outcome if the fire had occurred at night when people were sleeping.”

According to Lia, this fire also stands as a cautionary tale for grandfather clauses. These can be dangerous for communities, he says, because the clauses prevent buildings from being upgraded to current building codes.

“The grandfather clause is a convenient excuse to forgo necessary upgrades to fire safety systems,” Lia said. “It's dangerous. There should always be a timetable to upgrade buildings that are not up-to-date with their codes. Many communities require code updates when rehabbing more than 50 percent of the building, but that is not enough. When it comes to life safety, the risks to occupants and firefighters are too great to allow grandfathering.”

Lia applauds Prospect Heights Fire Protection Chief Drew Smith for underscoring how the outcome would have been different had the buildings been protected with fire

sprinklers. As a result of his inclusion of this fact in his press briefing, most media outlets reported the lack of fire sprinklers.

Lia said fire and building departments need to work closely together to identify which buildings are not up to code and to make sure their codes are reliably updated. He also referenced a new federal tax incentive for business owners which allows them to receive up to \$1 million in tax credit when they retrofit a commercial building with fire sprinklers.

“Destructive fire can happen anywhere, at any time. The best way to protect our communities is to adopt, upgrade and enforce fire and life safety codes,” Lia said. “It’s time to retire grandfather clauses that impede these efforts.”

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