



Backgrounder

Working Smoke Alarms: It's the Law!

For many years the Ontario fire service has been very successful in executing innovative smoke alarm programs in local communities. However, Ontarians are still dying in homes without working smoke alarms. As a result, the Office of the Marshal (OFM) developed *Working Smoke Alarms: It's the Law!*, a comprehensive public awareness campaign, to significantly increase public safety and reduce property loss in Ontario.

Working Smoke Alarms: It's the Law! is the result of a recent amendment to the Ontario Fire Code that requires homes to have working smoke alarms on every level. This is in addition to the existing requirement of having smoke alarms outside all sleeping areas. The last time the Ontario Fire Code was amended was in 1998 - *to require one smoke alarm be installed outside sleeping areas in existing Ontario homes.*

Developing a Strategy

In September, the OFM held a focus group to assist in devising strategies to dramatically increase the number of working smoke alarms in homes. Based on the discussion of representatives from fire departments, associations and the OFM, the group established a common goal – *To ensure that every home in Ontario has a working smoke alarm on every level.*

The results of the focus group were developed into a multi-pronged strategy to increase fire and life safety in Ontario. The elements of the strategy include:

- Regulation
- Public Awareness
- Technology
- Enforcement

Separately, each element addresses a key component of increasing public safety and reducing property loss in Ontario. Together, the elements create a comprehensive campaign called *Working Smoke Alarms: It's the Law!*

Research

With sufficient working smoke alarms in a home, occupants may have the precious seconds they need to safely escape a fire. In preparation for the amendment, the OFM reviewed four recent fires that claimed the lives of 17 people: 11 children, four adults and two seniors.

Working smoke alarms would have provided early detection of these fires and increased the occupants' opportunity to escape.

Residential Fire Statistics

- Over 90% of residential fires are preventable.
- An injury is reported in 1 out of every 17 preventable home fires – and not all injuries are reported.
- 1 out of every 100 preventable residential fires is a fatal fire.

Research from 1995 to 2004 regarding preventable/fatal/residential fires indicated:

- 35% of fires, a smoke alarm was present and operated.
- 25% of fires, a smoke alarm was present and did not operate.
- 21% of fires, no smoke alarm was present.
- 19% of fires, smoke alarm operation was undetermined.

This research pertains to 609 fatal fires that occurred from 1995 to 2004. In about 50 per cent of fatal home fires, there was no smoke alarm warning.

Statistics also indicate the holiday season between November and the end of January to be the highest point of the year for fires and related fatalities. Last year alone, from November 1, 2004 to January 31, 2005, there were 35 fire fatalities in Ontario.

Conclusion

Smoke alarms are critical safety devices that have been in existence for at least 30 years, however, Ontarians still continue to die in homes without working smoke alarms. This is why the provincial campaign *Working Smoke Alarms: It's the Law* was developed. Ensuring homeowners, landlords and tenants of residential occupancies are aware of their responsibilities and comply with the smoke alarm requirements will significantly increase public safety in Ontario.

Important Smoke Alarm Safety Facts

- All Ontario single family, semi-detached and town homes, whether owner-occupied or rented, must have a working smoke alarm on every level, and outside all sleeping areas.
- If anyone in the household sleeps with the bedroom door closed, install an alarm inside their bedroom.
- Never remove the batteries from smoke alarms. If nuisance alarms are a problem, try moving the alarm to another location or purchase an alarm with a "hush feature" that temporarily silences the alarm.
- Replace smoke alarms every 10 years.
- Test smoke alarms once a month and replace the batteries every year.
- Make sure everyone in the household knows what to do if the smoke alarm sounds. Develop a home fire escape plan and practice it with the entire household.