

“Working” smoke alarms save lives

BY SANDY MATHER, Educational Services

One of the most important fire safety devices for the home is the smoke alarm. A smoke alarm is one of those amazing inventions that cost practically nothing and have the ability to save thousands of lives each year.

The primary job of a smoke alarm is to protect you and your family from fire by providing an early warning signal so all of you can escape safely. A smoke alarm is designed to detect and warn that silent, but deadly smoke is in the air. This is especially important should a fire occur at night while you are sleeping.

While 97 out of 100 homes may have a smoke alarm, more than 33 percent of these homes are unprotected because the smoke alarms don't work. When a smoke alarm fails to work, it is frequently because the batteries are missing. People often remove or disconnect batteries to prevent nuisance activation caused by bathroom steam or cooking vapors.

Smoke alarms should be installed on every level of your home, including the basement, and smoke alarms should always be installed outside sleeping areas.

Smoke alarms consist of two basic parts: a sensor to sense the smoke and a very loud electronic horn to wake people up.

It's important to regularly check your smoke alarms to make sure they are working properly. Typically a smoke alarm uses a 9-volt battery, a lithium battery or is directly wired to your household electricity. It's recommended that you change the batteries on your smoke alarms twice a year. An easy way to remember this is to change the batteries when clocks are changed each spring and fall, and never remove the batteries in your smoke alarms. You may not remember to put them back in.

Many hardware, home supply or general merchandise stores carry smoke alarms. If you don't know where to purchase one, call your local fire department and they will provide you with some suggestions. Some fire departments even offer smoke alarms for little or no cost.

Remember the following:

- Install only smoke alarms that have the Underwriters Laboratories (UL) mark. This mark tells you that the alarm has been evaluated according to nationally recognized safety requirements.
- One smoke alarm in the home is not enough. A smoke alarm should be installed on every level of the home including the basement.
- Smoke alarms should be placed, at minimum, within 15 feet of all sleeping areas.