

State Fire Marshal Office Records 79 Fire Deaths in 2009 in South Carolina

The 2009 year came to an end last Friday with a reported 79 fire-related fatalities, an increase of four fatalities from 2008. The leading causes of fire fatalities continue to be heating, cooking, and smoking-related. 12 multiple-fatality fires were responsible for 29 deaths. All but 13 of the reported fatalities occurred in residential occupancies.

Since the New Year, five people have perished in fire-related incidents. South Carolina State Fire Marshal John Reich warns that the extreme cold weather predicted for the state this week, along with a potential winter storm advisory, poses additional concerns for fire and life safety.

"Extreme cold weather and power outages cause a higher fire threat due to the increased use of heating sources, such as electrical space heaters, fireplaces and wood stoves," Reich said.

According to the Fire Marshal's Office, heating-related fires are often caused by:

- Leaving portable or space heaters unattended;
- Fueling errors involving liquid or gas-fueled heaters;
- Flaws in design, installation or use of heating equipment;
- Placing things that can burn too close to space and portable heaters, and;
- Lack of regular cleaning of chimneys in fireplaces and wood stoves.

"Keep warm, but also keep safe by paying attention to a few safety precautions while using heating systems," Reich said.

Electric Heaters

Electric heaters should have automatic safety switches to turn them off, if tipped over. They also should carry the UL approval label. Be sure to check cords before plugging in the heater. If frayed, worn or broken, do not use them. Either replace the heater or have an electrician replace the cord. Just putting tape on the cord is not enough to prevent overheating and fire. Never use extension cords with portable heaters. To supply a heater with a small, ordinary household extension cord will cause the cord to overheat and burn. Keep all materials that can burn at least 36 inches away from the heating unit.

Kerosene Heaters

Many kerosene heater-related fires are attributed to the misuse or abuse of the devices. Get started on the right foot by purchasing a heater that carries the UL label. This means it has been tested for safety. Be sure it has an automatic safety switch to shut it off if it's tipped over. An automatic starter eliminates the need for matches and makes for safer starts. A fuel gauge will help ensure you do not overfill the heater dangerously. A safety grill on the front can prevent accidental contact burns. Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions for assembly. Use only crystal-clear 1K kerosene, never yellow or contaminated kerosene, or any other fuel. Refill the heater outside. Store kerosene outside in a metal container with a tight-fitting lid that is clearly marked for kerosene. When using kerosene heaters, be sure the room is well ventilated.

Wood Heaters

Wood stoves and other wood-burning devices are popular heating systems. Before investing in one for your home, think as much about safety as you will about ease of use, efficiency and appearance. Have your stove installed by a professional. Keep a tight-fitting screen or glass doors in front of the stove or fireplace at all times. Special retaining screens can keep children and pets away from wood stoves and prevent burns. Dispose of ashes in metal containers, never in paper bags, cardboard boxes or plastic wastebaskets. Wet ashes down to cool them thoroughly. Remember, ashes can retain enough heat to cause a fire for several days, so take no chances. Although these tips should help prevent a fire, know the signs of danger. A loud roar, sucking sounds and shaking pipes mean trouble and danger. If you hear these sounds, get everyone out of the house. Quickly shut off the fire's air supply by closing any air intake vents in the firebox. Close the damper. Call the fire department from a nearby phone.

General Heating Tips

Keep any heater at least three feet away from anything that might burn. This means curtains, walls, furniture, papers, etc. To avoid injury and other mishaps, keep children and pets away from heaters. Always remember, don't try to get a small device to do a big job. For best results, direct the heat from a portable heater where you want it. It won't heat an entire room. Focus the heat where you need it - but not so close it can cause fires or burns.

"Now is a great time to make sure your smoke alarms are in working order and to review your home escape plan so in the event of a fire, everyone in your household knows how to get out quickly and safely. For added safety, many people are considering the installation of economical residential fire sprinkler systems, which actually stop the spread of fire, protecting lives and property," Reich said.