NFPA’s Fire Prevention Week has been designated as October 4–10 this year, and the theme is “Hear the Beep Where You Sleep. Every Bedroom Needs a Working Smoke Alarm.” The theme for 2015 is so important because half of home fire deaths result from fires reported between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m. when most people are asleep. Fire Prevention Week is the perfect time to spread the message about the importance of having working smoke alarms in every bedroom, outside any sleeping area, and on every level of a home, including the basement.

NFPA has everything available for a successful Fire Prevention Week campaign. “Tools for the Fire Service” include step-by-step instructions to implement your campaign. “Materials for Teachers” include interactive lessons, activities, music, fire safety videos, apps, lesson plans, and take-home materials. “Kids and Families” includes the Sparky the Fire Dog website which utilizes pictures, printed items, and a smoke alarm checklist to make learning fire safety fun.

While smoke alarms are the theme this year, Fire Prevention Week is also a good time to reiterate the importance of fire extinguishers in the home. The most important places to have fire extinguishers in your home are the areas that are most susceptible to fire. The two areas of your home most at risk for fire are your kitchen and garage. So, at minimum, extinguishers should be located in the kitchen and garage. It is also important to have a fire extinguisher located on every level of your house.

Equally important to the location of fire extinguishers is making sure everyone in the home knows how to properly operate them and assigning someone to check the gauge monthly to be sure it is pressurized. It has been proven that portable fire extinguishers save lives and property by putting out small fires or containing them until the fire department arrives. Extinguishers do have limitations, and if the fire grows and is spreading rapidly, the number one priority for homeowners is to get out safely.

I am sure we will all agree that having a designated fire prevention week is critical for drawing attention to the dangers of fire and more importantly to address the need for smoke alarms, fire extinguishers, and fire prevention. The real reason I decided to write this article is to discuss Fire Prevention Week as it applies to NAFED members who read this publication.

Fire Prevention Week has always been primarily focused on residential properties and protecting the people who live there. The majority of the revenue and business strategy for fire protection distributors is protecting lives and properties in commercial buildings. Our goal should be to find a way to duplicate the focus and attention of Fire Prevention Week for commercial properties. Imagine if we could sustain that focus year-round!

I have been in this industry almost twenty years now, and I am still amazed how there is a blatant disregard for fire/life safety in businesses across this country. The same homeowner who adds smoke alarms or changes batteries regularly at home may be the decision maker regarding fire/life safety in a business setting. Our industry needs the same national advertising and focus to make Fire Prevention Week a year-round endeavor. Facility managers, loss prevention managers, restaurant managers, business owners, etc., all need to think about the dangers they place their employees and customers in on a daily basis by ignoring proper fire/life safety programs.

It is not just an issue of installing fire extinguishers, emergency/exit lights, sprinkler systems, pre-engineered systems, engineered suppression systems, and fire alarms—the concern is how many of those fire/life safety systems and equipment are being inspected properly and in a timely manner per code? The second problem, equally as important, is of those systems being inspected, how many are being maintained, repaired, and upgraded per the inspecting company’s recommendations or write-ups? Such oversight is less likely in the residential market. How many homeowners who test their smoke alarm would not replace the battery or buy a new detector if they knew it failed?
The problem for all of us in this industry is that we know there are a number of commercial buildings in our market areas that don’t perform the necessary inspections or fix deficiencies, even knowing the potential risk involved. I have always believed the fire protection industry has three factors that should help us fight this battle. The first being the insurance industry, the second being codes and code enforcement, and the last area being the urge to do the “right thing.”

I have found over my twenty years in the industry that it is very difficult for the insurance industry to manage and control the need for all properties to practice good fire/life safety. So, the next advocate for proper fire/life safety should be the national, state, and local codes. The key to enforcement of the codes is proper data and manpower to accomplish this very difficult role in our industry. I recently attended the annual conference for the National Association of State Fire Marshals while representing NAFED. This was my second year attending and, just like year one, I was surprised and disappointed how little time was devoted to proper life safety/fire prevention during the conference. I attended a session titled “Big Data & the Integration of Emerging Technology” and was excited thinking this might help our industry. To my disappointment, it was all about geographic fire department coverage and response time across the country, focusing on heavily populated areas. Geographic coverage and response time are only important when there is an actual fire or, more important, a fire that isn’t extinguished by a properly working fire system.

I am starting to believe if the insurance industry and code enforcement can’t be the driving factors to make proper fire/life safety a top priority, then it is up to fire protection companies and the general public. So now I have come full circle. I started this article talking about the importance of Fire Prevention Week for homeowners. I believe it is our job as an industry to make sure “Fire Prevention Year-Round” is our top priority with business owners and decision makers in each of our markets when it comes to proper fire/life safety! We have a big job ahead of us, but if NAFED members focus on educating our customers and partnering with our AHJs we can increase the number of inspections being performed and push to get customer approval to fix deficiencies to make all commercial buildings safe!

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