

SAFETY NOTES

February, 2015

TRAGIC REMINDER

A December 28th fire near San Antonio claimed six lives and injured another 18 persons in a senior apartment complex. It is a tragic reminder of fire evacuation needs in sites where a significant percentage of persons are elderly or have mobility challenges.

According to one report, the size of the fire on the third floor of the building was not the biggest concern. The real difficulties came with evacuating a building that housed 250 seniors.

As the fire alarm was sounding, one resident called her daughter to find out who to call at the apartment management level about the fire alarm. She had recently moved into the building and clearly was not fully informed how to respond to the fire alarm system.

Other residents said they paid little attention to the alarms initially because “false alarms were a regular occurrence” at the complex. Two residents had grandchildren spending the night. One teen was encouraged to just go back to bed because it was another false alarm while another teen slept through the initial alarm.

Many people were forced to seek fresh air on their decks because smoke invaded every level of the building. Some residents opened windows to let in fresh air only to discover toxic smoke sweeping into their room from the fire below. Many residents who eventually walked down steps, some from the eleventh story, were barefoot and in pajamas. Some residents delayed their exit and depended on the protection of a sprinklered building, not realizing that their building had no sprinkler system.

The Wedgwood Apartment fire was first reported around 6 AM. Over 150 fire personnel responded to the blaze. As of mid-January, the building has been declared uninhabitable. Residents are still trying to gather their important documents and retrieve medications. There are currently two class action lawsuits filed by displaced tenants against the management company for “failures in providing safe housing”. The complex passed a safety inspection less than four months prior to the fire. The complex had also become a non-smoking facility despite the fact that not all residents had



Six people were killed and 18 injured in the fire at the Wedgwood Apartments in San Antonio Texas on December 28th, 2014. Photo Courtesy of San Antonio Express News.

complied.

Some of the displaced residents are claiming that smoke detectors were not always maintained, that residents were not familiar with the building fire escape plans, and that the building was not sprinklered. The fire cause has not yet been made public.

Obvious questions for both building managers and residents include the following:

- Are tenants encouraged (or required) to have renter's insurance?
- Is there a pattern of false alarms in any rental property that requires immediate repair?
- Does every tenant know how to respond to the sound of the building fire alarm?
- Can every tenant hear the alarm system? If not, have provisions been made to tie the building's alarm system in to a strobe device to alert persons who are deaf or hard of hearing?
- Do tenants know whether or not they live in a sprinklered building?
- Could tenants on upper floors negotiate stairwells?
- If tenants cannot move to the stairwell, do they know they can "shelter in place" in their room if the building is sprinklered?
- Do tenants unlock their doors in a fire alarm event so that firefighters can determine whether everyone is safely outside without breaking down the door?
- Do tenants know the assigned "meeting place" where they should gather in an emergency situation?
- Do tenants keep records of their medications and basic "Go Bags" within reach that would help them manage at least 72 hours in the event of a major emergency?

Landlord / Property Manager Training Opportunity

Spokane C.O.P.S. will present another 2-day "Crime Free Multi-Housing" training event on March 19 and 26 at 2120 E. 1st Ave. Sessions provide information on fire safety concerns as well as fostering safe and healthy communities in rental housing. The cost is \$75 which includes lunch on the first day and the training manual.



For more information or to register, contact Maurece Vulcano at 509.835.3472 or mvulcano@spokanepolice.org.

You can sign up for this monthly newsletter, ask a fire-related question or suggest a specific safety topic by contacting Jan Doherty at jdoherty@spokanefire.org or by calling 509.625.7058.



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