

## S A F E T Y   N O T E S

September 2015



### Barriers and Gateways

We take doors for granted, but they sometimes make the difference between minor loss and full-scale tragedy in a residential fire.

In a single family home, the simple act of closing doors behind you when escaping a fire can prevent a small flame from consuming the whole house. Residents need to be constantly mindful of keeping all exit paths open for a quick escape. Doors “temporarily” blocked by storage or furniture can become a death trap in a fire emergency. People do not typically have the time and strength to remove even simple barriers when escaping toxic smoke. Keep all possible doorways cleared for a quick exit.

In a building with multiple living units, there may be additional challenges to maintaining required fire doors in constant working order. Look at the label on the inside edge of a door to determine its fire rating and whether it has been tested by a lab such as FM Global or UL (Underwriters Laboratory). There are different levels of fire rating, generally ranging from thirty minutes to three hours.

Fire doors with thirty minute ratings are designed to block the spread of smoke rather than resist flame. Fire doors may only be held open when they are equipped with a device that will automatically release as soon as the building fire alarm is activated. Door wedges, bungee cords hooked between the door and wall, or strips of tape or rubber on the latches are never allowed. In a fire situation, a rigged latch can fail when hot gases build up on one side of the door and blow it open. Fire doors must be replaced if they have been compromised with screw holes or other damage that could allow smoke to enter into the corridor or stairwell.

Requirements for fire doors were developed to prevent tragedies. It is important that building managers as well as residents understand the purpose of fire doors and take action to assure that protection is not



**This fire in a California apartment building caused the deaths of 3 people. The door closer was noted as broken during an inspection earlier in the month. It was never fixed.**



Three people died in this stairwell because of a broken bolt on a fire door.

eliminated because of the temporary convenience of in-and-out access to a floor or building.

A California fire that occurred several years ago in a 24 unit, three-story apartment building illustrates the importance of working fire doors. An inspection of the building one month prior to the fire reported a broken automatic door closer at the second floor exit into a protected stairwell.

That door was not repaired by the night of the fire. A mother with two children collapsed from the toxic smoke when they entered the stairwell from the third floor to escape the fire. The broken bolt on the door closer contributed to multiple civil charges and enforcement activities, a lawsuit settled for more than \$13 million and a family mourning three deaths.

More than 750 years ago, a well-known poem was written to show the logical consequence of a missing nail in a horseshoe. “For the want of a nail, the shoe was lost” ends with the whole kingdom being lost. In our tale of door closers, “for the want of a bolt... a family was lost”.

## Increased Fire Risk

Dry, hot weather patterns are the reason to stay vigilant with outdoor fire precautions this month. Remember that Firestorm '91 started on October 16<sup>th</sup> of that year!

- Observe the City and County burn restrictions on outdoor recreational fires.
- Rake up pine needles and keep combustible trash cleared away from buildings.
- Do not allow residents to store lighters outside for smoking or barbecues. Stray lighters are also convenient for curious kids or troubled adults.



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](mailto:jdoherty@spokanefire.org) or by calling 509.625.7058.



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