



OFFICE OF THE ILLINOIS STATE FIRE MARSHAL

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OSFM and IDPH Partner to Promote Elderly Fire Safety Awareness

Adults over the age of 65 are twice as likely to die in a fire

Springfield, Ill- As cold winter temperatures linger across Illinois, the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal (OSFM) and Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) remind residents, especially older adults and their caregivers, to take extra precautions to prevent winter-related fires.

Cold weather brings an increased use of heating equipment, space heaters, electric blankets, and alternative heating sources. Unfortunately, these items can pose serious fire risks if not used properly. According to the United States Fire Administration (USFA), adults over the age of 65 are twice as likely to die in fires and are at a greater risk of injury due to slower reaction times, mobility challenges, and medical conditions that may limit their ability to escape quickly. By age 75, that risk increases to three times that of the general population and to four times by age 85.

“Winter months present unique fire hazards, particularly for our senior population,” **said Illinois State Fire Marshal Michele Pankow**. “Simple steps like keeping space heaters at least three feet away from anything that can burn, testing smoke alarms monthly, and never using an oven to heat your home can make a life-saving difference.”

According to national fire data, heating equipment is one of the leading causes of home fires during the winter season. OSFM and IDPH encourage families, caregivers, and neighbors to check in on older adults to ensure their homes are safe and properly equipped.

“Older Illinoisans face unique risks in the home, including fires and falls,” **said IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra**. “Preventing injuries is a critical part of public health, and simple steps, like testing smoke alarms, keeping heating equipment safe, and removing tripping hazards, can significantly reduce the risk of harm. We encourage families and caregivers to act now to protect their loved ones.”

Fire Safety Tips for Older Adults:

- Keep space heaters at least three feet away from curtains, furniture, bedding, and other flammable materials.
- Plug space heaters directly into wall outlets—never use extension cords or power strips.
- Turn off space heaters and electric blankets before leaving the room or going to bed.
- Have furnaces, fireplaces, and chimneys inspected and cleaned annually by a qualified professional.

- Install and test smoke and carbon monoxide alarms monthly. Ensure alarms are less than 10 years old.
- If you don't live in an apartment building, consider sleeping in a room on the ground floor in order to make emergency escape easier.
- Contact your building manager or fire department to discuss your plan if you need extra help escaping.
- Create and practice a home fire escape plan, making sure all exits are clear and accessible.
- Keep eyeglasses, keys, hearing aids, canes, walkers and a phone within reach next to your bed.
- Avoid wearing loose-fitting clothing while cooking or near open flames.

The OSFM and IDPH also encourage families to develop a support plan for older loved ones, ensuring they have working alarms, accessible exits, and assistance if needed during an emergency. Winter safety starts with preparation. Taking proactive steps today can help prevent tragedy tomorrow.

For more fire safety tips and resources, visit the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal website at sfm.illinois.gov.

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