

Fire safety in Weston: Check detectors and chimneys but beware of scams

Written by Kimberly Donnelly

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When the weather outside is frightful, a fire inside can certainly be delightful — unfortunately, at this time of year, it can also be deadly.

In the wake of the tragic Christmas morning house fire in Stamford that took the lives of three children and their grandparents, fire safety is on the minds of many area residents. It's also a top priority for the members Weston Volunteer Fire Department as well as officials who are warning about dangerous fire safety related scams.

According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), we are smack in the middle of the deadliest three months for fire (December, January and February).

The danger is primarily due to cold weather which means more space heaters are being used, more fires are being lit, and houses are closed up tight, increasing the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Home heating mishaps are the number two cause of house fires (second only to cooking).

According to the NFPA, In 2009, heating equipment was involved in an estimated 58,900 reported U.S. home structure fires, with associated losses of 480 civilian deaths, 1,520 civilian injuries, and \$1.1 billion in direct property damage.

Space heaters accounted for one-third of home heating fires and four out of five (79%) of home heating fire deaths.

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Placing things that burn — mattresses, Christmas trees, upholstered furniture — too close to heat sources was the leading factor in fatal home heating fires and accounted for more than half of home heating fire deaths, according to the NFPA.

Weston Fire Chief John Pokorny, who also serves as the town's fire marshal, said the number one precaution homeowners can take to prevent injury, death, and extensive property damage from fires is to install and properly maintain smoke alarms and carbon monoxide detectors.

"Smoke detectors offer an early warning. There's a huge difference between having them and not. Having detectors is a lifesaver," Chief Pokorny said.

But just having smoke and carbon monoxide detectors — CO is a deadly odorless, colorless gas produced from incomplete oxidation during combustion — is not enough, Chief Pokorny said. "They have to be functioning," he said.

That means changing batteries at least twice a year, testing detectors once a month, and replacing them completely at least every 10 years.

Weston has a CO detector ordinance that requires all homes to have them. The fire department helped supply homeowners with them a few years ago, and they are still able to make them available to those who request them.

Chief Pokorny recommends having both CO and smoke detectors on every level of a house. Those who are hard of hearing should have detectors right in their bedrooms, he said.

"Sleeping is when people are most vulnerable to fire. The detectors are vitally important," he stressed.

Chief Pokorny has seen many house fires in Weston. Too many, he said, were caused by circumstances very similar to what happened in Stamford last week.

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“In Weston, a lot of our major fires have been caused by fireplace ashes,” Chief Pokorny said. “Generally, ashes should stay in the fireplace, or in an airtight metal container away from the house for at least three days.”

That’s right — fireplace ashes can re-ignite even if they are a few days old and even if it’s cold outside, Chief Pokorny said. “They’re dangerous.”

Fireplaces should have study screens to prevent sparks from flying into the room, and the chimneys should be inspected and cleaned regularly, Chief Pokorny said.

Creosote from burning certain kinds of wood can build up inside a chimney and ignite, causing extensive damage, he said.

Chimney cleaning

As important as proper chimney cleaning is, homeowners are being warned that this is also the time of year when chimney sweep scams are most prevalent.

The most common scenario, said certified local chimney sweep and volunteer Weston firefighter Dave Burns is that someone will cold call and offer a free or very inexpensive chimney inspection.

Mr. Burns owns and operates August West Chimney Sweeps in Weston. “We never cold call,” Mr. Burns said, adding that legitimate chimney sweeps rarely do.

Scammers, however, will typically pretend they did work for a previous homeowner or say they are in the neighborhood and offer to do an inspection, Mr. Burns said. Then they will say they have discovered a major problem that must be fixed immediately to avoid an emergency — and

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the fix can run into the thousands of dollars.

Not only can homeowners be financially fleeced by unscrupulous chimney sweep scammers, they can put themselves in greater danger by thinking their chimneys have been properly cleaned, when in fact they have not, Mr. Burns said.

“That’s the real crime,” he said. “These so-called companies come in and say they are doing a low-price cleaning, but they don’t actually do a proper job. It’s scary. We’ve seen these companies leave people with an unsafe chimney. But what’s really scary is then the homeowner thinks it’s OK for another year, when in fact it hasn’t been properly cleaned.”

Mr. Burns recommends always checking feedback and references online or with neighbors or friends before having anyone come to do work in the home. Check places like Angie’s List or the Weston Neighbors and Newcomers Club, which keeps a listing of reputable local contractors, he suggested.

It’s important, also to get a second opinion if someone is suddenly telling you that you need thousands of dollars of repair work when you’ve just hired them to do a cleaning.

But having an inspection and cleaning done by a reputable company like August West is important.

“Soot and creosote is the enemy,” Mr. Burns said.

Also, the damper should reliably stay open when a fire is going in the fireplace. “That’s more important than it sealing tightly when the fireplace is not in use — that’s what people are usually more concerned about,” he said.

A good chimney sweep will also check the condition of the inner liner, check for animal nest, and check to make sure the chimney is drafting properly.

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“Then, I always have a conversation with homeowners about smoke detectors and CO detectors. It’s hard for me not to put my firefighter hat on,” said the 15-year veteran of the Weston Volunteer Fire Department.

Mr. Burns also works the overnight shift as a Weston dispatcher. During the downtime, he updates his website, augustwestchimney.com, which is filled with information on chimney safety and general fire safety tips.

Fire Safety Tips

1. Have installation and maintenance of heating equipment done by a professional.
2. Make sure your heating equipment is in good working condition and up to code.
3. Keep anything that can burn at least three feet away from your fireplace or wood stove.
4. Have your chimney, fireplace, or wood stove inspected and cleaned annually.
5. Burn only dry, well-seasoned wood that has been split, stacked, and allowed to dry for 12 months.
6. Have a sturdy screen on a fireplace, and allow ashes to cool at least 72 hours before disposing of them in a metal container.
7. Install carbon monoxide alarms and smoke detectors in your home.

Tips provided by the National Fire Prevention Association.