

Precautionary Measures
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Exit signs. Alternative egress routes. National media attention has brought these terms to the forefront yet for over twenty years my husband has been nothing short of neurotic when it comes to safe egress, whether we are in familiar territory or unfamiliar domiciles. He is even more diligent when we are accompanied by children or elderly relatives.

For these past few days, we've been horrified by the tragic loss of life within a small Rhode Island night club. Anyone who has been attentive to the live video footage of the night club fire has experienced a sudden education in the accelerated movement of an interior fire and its subsequent flashover which in this case, has forever resulted in the loss of life for ninety-seven human beings. And all within three minutes. Exasperating the tragedy? Available exits were not fully utilized. Sprinkler systems were not in place.

I'm not sensationalizing this horrible event. Rather, I'm incredibly humbled by it. You see, I am one of the millions of people who have the "it won't happen to me" syndrome. Making any kind of grand gesture to protect myself for a highly improbable fire emergency had previously seemed unnecessary.

And yet, my husband persisted in the face of my resistance. Just a few years ago, we applied for and received a building permit which allowed us to construct a long awaited home. I counted on aesthetic comfort. He insisted on ultimate safety. Could a residential fire sprinkler system possibly accommodate us both?

Admittedly, my visual familiarity with sprinkler systems had been limited as I'd only noticed blatant, brass starbursts dominating the ceilings of hospitals, schools and progressive commercial establishments. Today I'm happy to report that residential sprinkler systems are designed with aesthetically conscious people in mind. Our home system has sprinkler heads concealed behind white covers which are not noticed by house guests unless pointed out by my husband (and believe me, he always does).

Prior to the installation process, I learned these eye-opening facts about residential fire sprinkler systems: Most fires are extinguished with the operation of just one sprinkler head in the area of the fire. Hollywood has done us a disservice when portraying a favorite film star holding a match to a sprinkler head, falsely demonstrating all sprinkler heads in the building to engage. Recent data concludes that residential fire sprinklers use a little more than 10% of the water a fire department would use to extinguish a fire. That means 341 gallons from the sprinklers vs. 2935 gallons from the firefighters. More importantly, the response time of a sprinkler system is almost immediate, not five to ten minutes away.

Smoke detectors increase the odds of surviving a fire to 47%. In conjunction with residential fire sprinklers the rate of survival more than doubles to over 97%, especially for children and the elderly who are less likely to awaken and exit a fiery, smoke-filled structure before a dangerous flash over occurs. This non-survivable condition occurs in fires within three to five minutes. We saw this occurrence in Rhode Island...the only difference being that eventually 97 adults succumbed... and they had been awake and in the presence of the fire when it started.

One last concern about the home fire sprinkler system was that it would be expensive. Actually, our cost was under the national average of \$1.00 to \$1.50 per square foot of sprinkled area. More importantly, a fire sprinkler system is designed to last the life time of the home where in fact 80% of all fire deaths occur. Future generations will be protected. Who can put a price tag on that kind of peace of mind?

What have we learned this week? We've been witness to a grim reminder that no one is immune to tragedy. Precautionary measures taken and awareness of our surroundings will aid us in times of any emergency. The forty-four members of the Peterborough Fire & Rescue Assoc. extend their sympathies to the grieving families of the Rhode Island tragedy. And as always, you are welcome to call us at 924-8090 with regards to any safety questions or concerns.