

New state law mandates carbon monoxide detectors

News editor and staff writer

By John Koys and Seth Ufheil

Odorless, colorless carbon monoxide gas kills about 200 people annually in the United States and injures some 15,000 more, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Additionally, the number of calls related to carbon monoxide poisoning increased 26 percent from last year -- from 873 calls in 2005 to 914 calls through Oct. 31, with a projected 1,100 to 1,200 for 2006, according to the Illinois Poison Center.

On Nov. 12, seven girls at a sleepover in Downers Grove were taken to Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove after suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning. A boiler switch designed to close the damper malfunctioned, causing the CO levels to rise, said Marsha Giesler, Downers Grove Fire Department public education officer.

The boiler was housed in a room adjacent to where the girls were sleeping. The family did not have any carbon monoxide detectors in the home.

Beginning Monday, Jan. 1, a new state law will require every dwelling to have a carbon monoxide detector within 15 feet of every room used for sleeping. This covers single-family homes, townhouses, multifamily buildings, hotels and motels.

At Clarendon Hills Arms Apartments in Clarendon Hills, property manager Estee Fournier said CO detectors will be installed in the building's 84 living units by Friday, Dec. 29.

"We think it's a great idea," Fournier said. "We've already got smoke detectors, and with what we hear in the news, why not these (detectors) too?"

Hinsdale Fire Chief Pat Kenny said implementing the new law will present challenges.

"Are we going to knock on everyone's door and ask, 'Do you have a detector?' No," said Kenny.

Instead, the Fire Department, like other agencies in the western suburbs, will take a practical approach to first educate the community of the changes by getting the word out, Kenny said.

According to the new law, the owner of the building is responsible for supplying and installing all required alarms with batteries.

"It is the responsibility of the tenant," the law states, "to test and provide general maintenance for the alarms within the tenant's dwelling unit or rooming unit and to notify the owner in writing of any deficiencies that the tenant cannot correct."

A tenant must replace batteries, according to the law.

Punishment for willful noncompliance is an arrest, rather than a ticket, as is the case now when smoke detectors are absent from a home. Kenny was critical of that aspect of the new law.

"It's like going from zero to 100 mph in one step," he said.

Rather than focus on the punitive nature, Kenny said the law's wording should have better described implementation and safety.

"The goal is to have safer homes," he said.

The carbon monoxide detector may be battery-powered, plug-in with a battery backup or wired into the building's electrical system with a battery backup.

John Koys' e-mail address is:
jkoys@libertysuburban.com

Seth Ufheil's e-mail address is:
sufheil@libertysuburban.com