

Fire crew puts out mock blaze to support proposed sprinkler law

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FRANKFORD — To the left, a charred mattress with exposed springs sat next to a melted television and lamp shade. To the right, an identical mock-up of the same bedroom set remained intact with singed curtains and drenched white bed sheets. Fire officials Tuesday conducted the side-by-side burn of the bedroom modules at the Sussex County Fire Academy to show the effectiveness of home sprinklers during residential fires. Sussex County Fire Marshal Joe Inga and firefighters from Frankford, Hampton, Ogdensburg, Sussex Borough and Wantage looked on as a wastebasket fire blackened half of the non-sprinkler module in the five minutes it would take for firefighters to respond. On the right, the same fire was put out by a sprinkler system that activated within 30 seconds, turning dark smoke into a cleaner white and allowing Hampton firefighters to simply remove the burned wastebasket without having to use any additional equipment.

“In the sprinkler house, you’re good. You’re moving back in already,” said David Kurasz, executive director of the New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board. The board is touring the state to push for a proposed building code that would require all new homes to be equipped with fire sprinklers. The rule would take effect in 2012 and only apply to new construction. The guidelines were adopted into the International Residence Code this year in response to the trend toward lightweight construction materials that are especially flammable. Each state must ratify the proposal into their own set of codes.

Fire officials who see devastation firsthand are big proponents of the new rule. According to Kurasz, 83 civilians and two firefighters died in New Jersey home fires in 2008. Property damage also is a concern, both in dollar figures and sentimental value. “Until it affects you and your family, you don’t care,” Inga said. “We’re not immune to this, and people just don’t understand that.” The rule is up for public comment in New Jersey until Nov. 7, after which the state’s Department of Community Affairs commissioner will make a final decision. The proposal faces major opposition from state builder associations, who argue the installation of home sprinklers is costly and a decision best left to consumers.

“We’re not opposed to sprinklers; what we’re opposed to is mandatory sprinklers,” said George Spais, a director with the New Jersey Home Builders Association. “It’s a situation where the government is making the decision for you.”

Kurasz said he never met anyone opposed to home sprinklers, but their support is always followed by a “but.” The sprinklers are too costly, they’re ugly, they use too much water and flood the house, skeptics say. Kurasz, who admits his industry has a financial stake in mandatory sprinkler systems, said these concerns are myths. Sprinklers account for only 1 percent to 2 percent of the building costs — equivalent to new carpeting or cabinetry — and can lay flat in the ceiling with a cover plate that matches the color of the room, Kurasz said.

The sprinklers only are activated by heat — not smoke — in the affected rooms. “People think every head opens up, but that’s not so,” Inga said. “They don’t understand how a sprinkler system works.” Any water damage would be less than the gallons of water required by firefighters to put out a rampant blaze, he added. Most importantly, Kurasz said, a sprinkler allows families to escape unharmed.

“Everything is about time, time, time,” he said.