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## Older Apartments Often Lack Fire Sprinklers

By [NATE SCHWEBER](#)

HOBOKEN

HOURS after a four-alarm fire left 28-year-old Seth Dembowitz dead in his bedroom on Jan. 29, city officials said that the presence of a sprinkler system in the five-story downtown apartment building might have prevented the loss of life.

The building did not have such a system, but because it was renovated before 1977, when the state's Uniform Construction Code was modified to require better fire-suppression technology in apartments, it was in compliance with all laws, officials said.

The [New Jersey](#) Department of Community Affairs, which oversees statewide fire safety, said it has no idea how many people live in older buildings that, like Mr. Dembowitz's, comply with the laws but do not have the kind of equipment required in newer buildings or buildings that have recently been renovated.

"It's an issue," said Patrick Lacey, a Jersey City Fire Department battalion chief. People who live in buildings without the newer equipment are less safe, he said.

When the updated code went into effect in 1977, the state also upgraded its Uniform Fire Code, requiring battery-powered smoke detectors and safer exits in all residences.

The construction code regulations, which require sprinkler systems that automatically notify 911 when they are triggered, would provide more protection if they were applicable to all buildings, said Hoboken's fire marshal, Capt. Robert Falco.

"There are more stringent requirements for buildings built presently than in the past," he said.

But bringing old buildings up to modern fire-safety standards can be expensive. Mario Fini, a Hoboken firefighter who owns five office buildings and seven residential buildings in the city, said the initial cost of introducing a modern sprinkler system into a building is more than \$20,000, and each individual apartment adds about \$3,000.

Mr. Fini says that he owns one building that predates the code and that he has not put a sprinkler system in it not only because of the cost, but also because construction would disrupt each of the 20 residences. "If you're not required to do it, you don't do it — that's pretty much standard in the industry," he said.

He added that few tenants ask about sprinkler systems and that even fewer would want to help foot the cost of installing them, through rent increases.

Hoboken's acting fire chief, Richard Blohm, who reported that the fire that killed Mr. Dembowitz might have been controlled faster had the building had sprinklers, understands the expense of installing updated fire-suppression systems. Not long ago he testified to a state committee after a fire in a dormitory at [Seton Hall University](#) in 2000 killed three students and injured 58 others. At the time, some critics said it would be too expensive to outfit every dormitory with sprinklers. Today sprinklers are mandatory in all dormitories on every campus.

"You can't put the price on human life," he said. "There's no cost that's too exorbitant."

Applied Development Company, the firm that owns the building where Mr. Dembowitz lived, did not return a call seeking comment. The cause of the fire, and how long it burned inside Mr. Dembowitz's apartment before spreading into the hallway and triggering a fire alarm that notified emergency workers, is still under investigation, said First Assistant Prosecutor Guy Gregory of Hudson County.

The state is taking small steps toward extending better protection to apartment building residents. The Department of Community Affairs is currently summarizing comments on a proposed bill that would make sprinklers mandatory in all residential buildings more than six stories tall, said Chris Donnelly, a department spokesman.

Ray Falco, the fire subcode official in Hoboken, who is also Captain Falco's father, said that residents in older buildings must be extra vigilant to stay safe.

He said that if he lived in a building that was not equipped with sprinklers, "I would make sure I had enough smoke detectors" to ensure warnings about any fires.

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