

By Bruce Bouch, Maryland Deputy State Fire Marshal

From my many years of experience in the fire industry, I can tell you that no one is immune from fire. Fire can happen anytime, anywhere and can leave behind tragic outcomes, especially when it comes to house fires, which continue to take the lives of more than 2,500 Americans each year.

In Maryland, the first half of 2013 has been particularly devastating. So far this year, 45 people have died in home fires; in 35 percent of those deadly fires, it was found that the structures either didn't have smoke alarms or the structures' smoke alarms were not operating. This is a significant increase in residential fire fatalities compared to the same time last year. In fact, in all of 2012, there were only 53 residential fire deaths in our state. If fire fatalities continue at this rate, there will be a nearly 50 percent increase in 2013. This is a statistic that must be reversed.

To aid in that effort, a new state law aimed at reducing home fire deaths went into effect on July 1, 2013. It requires replacement of any battery-only operated smoke alarm that is more than 10 years old with a unit powered by a 10-year sealed-in battery – ultimately affecting the more than 800,000 Maryland homes with battery-only operated smoke alarms. These sealed-in, long-life battery alarms provide continuous protection for a decade, and national fire experts like the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and National Association of State Fire Marshals (NASFM) recommend their use.

Why is a sealed-in battery important? Nationally, two-thirds of all home fire deaths occur in homes with either no smoke alarm or no working alarm, mainly due to missing or disconnected batteries. Last year in Maryland, nearly half of fire fatalities were in homes with inoperable alarms or no alarms at all. By sealing the battery inside the alarm, the unit becomes tamper resistant and removes the burden from consumers to remember to change batteries, which will save lives.

The new law also requires homeowners to ensure they have a smoke alarm installed on each floor and in each sleeping area, per NFPA recommendations. A recent national survey found that less than a quarter of homeowners follow this guideline, and three out of four don't know where to place alarms in their homes. The new law does not affect a/c powered 120v smoke alarms with a battery back-up. The a/c powered alarms will continue to be replaced with same type devices requiring a 9-volt battery back-up.

During a fire, you have only minutes from the sound of the first smoke alarm to escape a fire. The sooner you hear an alarm, the sooner you can respond and the better chance a family has to escape. Not only does this help your family, but it decreases the chance a firefighter would be injured or killed trying to save a life.

The loss of life will certainly continue unless we spread the message of home fire safety. Developing and practicing an escape plan with your family in the case of fire is one thing we should all do. The other is to make sure you have working smoke alarms in your homes.

I urge families to think about the age of their home's smoke alarms. All units should be replaced every 10 years. If you're not sure how old they are, replace them today.

These simple steps can go a long way to help save lives tomorrow and every day in the future.

Bruce Bouch is a Deputy State Fire Marshal with the Office of the State Fire Marshal in Maryland.

He can be reached at:

DSFM Bruce D. Bouch, Director of Public Education and Media Affairs, Office of the State Fire Marshal, 410-653-8999 (office); bruce.bouch@maryland.gov; <http://mdsp.org/firemarshal>