

Publication: The Dallas Morning News; Date: Oct 10, 2011; Section: Metro; Page: 5B



EMERGENCIES

Dallas fire fatalities drop to record low

Officials say 7 deaths in last year still too many, but alarm program helped

By **SELWYN CRAWFORD**
Staff Writer
scrawford@dallasnews.com

Dallas had the fewest number of fire fatalities ever in the recently concluded fiscal year.

Dallas Fire-Rescue officials say the death toll for the fiscal year that ended Oct. 1 was seven. It is the first time in memory that the final tally didn't reach double digits.

The all-time high was 35 deaths recorded in the 1995-96 fiscal year.

Assistant Chief and Fire Marshal Debra Carlin, a 33-year veteran of the fire department, credited the low number of fire fatalities to the department's aggressive smoke alarm installation program.

Carlin said mounds of statistical evidence show that a building with a working smoke detector gives occupants a 50 percent better chance of survival than a building without one. Since the 2000-01 fiscal year, the city has installed more than 60,000 detectors for residents.

"There is no doubt that's the reason," Carlin said. "I absolutely believe that. Prevention is the key. And kudos to our firefighters. They really have done a good job of installing these."

As the days ticked by in the run up to the record low, Carlin said, "Every night when I went to sleep I was hoping I wouldn't get a phone call."

Fire deaths fall to record low

Continued from Page 1B

Mayor Pro Tem Pauline Medrano, chair of the council's public safety committee, lauded the achievement.

"It's always sad when you lose life, but when you compare the previous years and all those years we had double digits, I'm sure Chief [Louis] Bright and his command staff and all of Dallas Fire-Rescue are elated," Medrano said. "They definitely had a lot to do with it with all their programs, whether it's the smoke detectors, codes or inspections. The whole department has a lot to celebrate."

Any celebrating, though, is tempered by the fact that among the seven who died was Dallas Fire-Rescue Lt. Todd Krodle. The veteran firefighter perished in August while fighting an apartment fire.

Many of the smoke alarms credited with helping to save lives were installed through the city program, which has provided them to single-family structures or duplexes for free since the 1980s.

AT A GLANCE Fire prevention tips

- Make sure you have a smoke detector on every floor, and check the batteries every six months. If you live within Dallas city limits, you can call 311 to request one, and Dallas Fire-Rescue will come and install it free of charge.
- Have chimneys cleaned and professionally inspected every year. Do not use miscellaneous items for fireplace fires — they can be more flammable than expected or release dangerous toxic fumes into the home.
- Provide at least a gallon of water a day for a live Christmas tree to prevent it from drying out.
- Have a fire escape plan ready for family members and guests. Practice it. Never go back into a burning building.

Carlin said in the early stages of the program, one alarm was installed in each home. In recent years, fire department employees have begun installing them in all the sleeping areas of a home and in the hallways. The new smoke alarms have a battery life of 10 years.

"Dallas has been very successful with this program, to the extent that other entities are starting to look at what we do," Carlin said. "A lot of departments have it on a smaller basis, but I can't imagine anyone beating us."

The toughest part of the quick installations, she said, is persuading sometimes leery homeowners to let fire personnel inspect their homes.

"We're just focused on getting the detectors in more than anything else," said Carlin, head of the department's Life Safety and Professional Standards Bureau. "We don't ask them all kinds of questions. We feel like we're there to protect the people."

Carlin said fire officials often sweep into a neighborhood right after a fire because residents are usually more recep-

tive then. But fire officials, along with volunteers from nonprofits such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and Junior League, also do frequent blitzes in neighborhoods that have the highest rates of fire injuries and deaths.

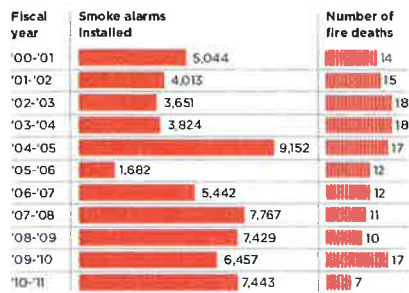
Dallas Fire Lt. Shannon Hopps said that while fire personnel are in the homes, they talk with the residents about other safety measures, such as developing and practicing a fire escape plan. Hopps said the department is also about to unveil a new five-minute video, in both English and Spanish, that shows people other problems in their homes that they might overlook.

"It's not just fires," Hopps said. "We're talking to them about life safety. We feel invincible in our homes, you know, because we own it. Nothing can happen to us there."

Hopps said the video will discuss basic fire tips such as not leaving food cooking unattended — the second leading cause of fires in Dallas, after electrical fires — but will also address less-obvious issues

Alarm installations, fire deaths in Dallas

Number of smoke alarms installed through the city program and fire deaths in Dallas:



SOURCE: Dallas Fire-Rescue

Staff graphic

such as turning pot handles on the stove inward, making sure addresses are clearly visible from the street, and placing adult medications out of the reach of children.

"There's just a lot of things in the home that people take for granted," Hopps said. "Extension cords, for example, are big problem. By law, you can't use an extension cord longer than 90 days. So if you've got an extension cord plugged up to a TV or your refrigerator, you need to go ahead and plug that appliance into the wall."

Carlin is hoping that Hopps' pilot video education program, along with the continued installation of smoke detectors — the city has about 4,000 on hand and is seeking grant money to purchase more — will drive the fire fatality totals even lower in the 2012 fiscal year.

"We're proud of it," Carlin said of the record-low figure. "But as long as this number is anything other than a zero, I won't be satisfied. Zero is always the goal and I believe we can get there."