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Mandatory Fire Sprinklers: Balancing Home and Workplace Safety

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other events impacting the victims. While perhaps every need cannot be met specifically through the State's Attorney's Office, it is through this channel that the task force can collaborate and bring their concerns to an authority that can implement necessary changes. This process effectively enables prosecutors and the public to ensure victims' needs are not compromised within the judicial process.⁴

Conclusion

While the aforementioned collection of programs and collaborations is by no means exhaustive of the working relationships that prosecutors share with the public and the communities that rely upon them, it offers a glimpse of the many facets comprising this office. It is this daily contact with those in need of more comprehensive attention than what the courts alone provide, with the families trying to keep a member out of prison, with the residents trying to build pride in their neighborhoods—that makes the prosecutor a vital member of the both the courtroom and the community. The time and effort devoted to this involvement, however, is hardly balanced by the same in press coverage. Nonetheless, it only acts as a testament to the prosecutors' commitment to the public that they continue to serve in these collaborative and progressive activities. Most certainly, the public works of the prosecutor, while not by media definition, really are quite sensational.

1. *People v. Johnson*, 208 Ill.2d.53 (2003).

2. Chicago Daily Law Bulletin, March 2, 2004; Chicago Tribune, June 26, 2003.

3. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, December 2000.

4. Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice Bulletin #3.

Mandatory Fire Sprinklers: Balancing Home and Workplace Safety

Eileen D. Collins

In the wake of the highly publicized fire that killed six people in the Chicago building that housed Cook County government offices, the Chicago City Council now has before it two competing proposals that would require older buildings over 80 feet tall to be retrofitted with fire sprinklers.¹ City ordinances already on the books now require fire sprinklers in all buildings 80 feet and higher built after 1975. While one pending proposal would require all high-rises built before 1975 to be retrofitted with sprinklers within five years, a second proposal would exempt residential and historic high-rises and would allow a twelve-year time frame for compliance.

While both sides seem to be in agreement regarding sprinklers in commercial buildings, debate surrounds the proposed residential sprinkler requirement. Opponents of the residential sprinkler requirement, primarily concerned with the cost associated with the installation of sprinklers, worry about where the money will come from to pay for the upgrades. Proponents, citing numerous examples of lives lost in high-rise fires, counter that one should not put a price on human life.

Compared to fires fought with a fire hose alone, fires that are also fought with fire sprinklers save more lives and decrease the cost and extent of damages in the home.² A fire sprinkler has less water flow and lower water pressure than a fire hose.

There are also several myths surrounding fire sprinklers that make some hesitant to support fire sprinkler requirements, such as cigarette smoke or a fire alarm will activate sprinklers, or if one sprinkler is activated all will then activate. Fire sprinklers are activated by heat alone, not smoke, sound or other sprinklers.

The proposal endorsed by Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley would require all commercial build-

Fire records show that 93 percent of all fires are handled by only one sprinkler.

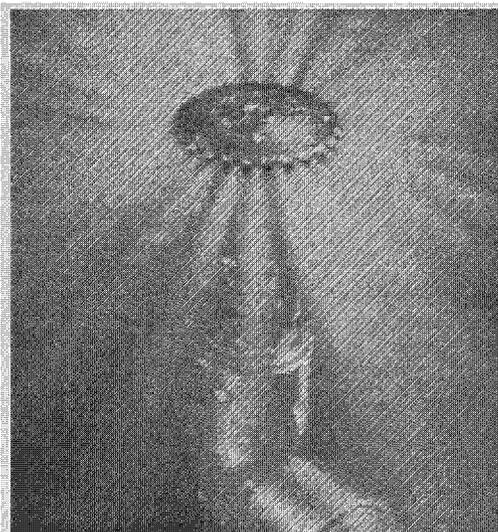
ings taller than 80 feet built before 1975 to be retrofitted with sprinklers within 12 years. A competing proposal endorsed by Alderman Edward M. Burke (14th Ward) would require sprinklers in both commercial and residential buildings over 80 feet built after 1975. Although Daley's plan exempts both residential and historic buildings, it would require safety evaluations of those exempted buildings to determine whether the building meets the required level of safety.

Estimates for the installation of fire sprinklers vary, ranging from \$3-4 per square feet up to \$10-15 per square feet. To help alleviate some of the financial burden of complying with these ordinances, Mayor Daley is supporting federal and state tax breaks, property tax exemptions, and

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relaxing the building code requirements to make installation cheaper.³ The building code changes would allow plastic pipe, alter the water pressure requirements, and remove the requirement of separate electrical conduits for fire alarm notification and fire detection.

Several other cities nationwide require high-rise buildings to be equipped with fire sprinklers. Other cities that exempt residential buildings from fire sprinkler codes include New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and San Diego.⁴ Cities that exempt historic buildings include Atlanta, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Because more than 80 percent of all fire deaths occur in the home, these sprinklers that are standard in office buildings, stores and restaurants are also making their way into single-family homes. Nationwide, over two hundred towns now require sprinklers in all new homes.



Smoke detectors alone do nothing more than alert a homeowner to the presence of a fire, while a fire sprinkler immediately begins to combat the fire. This saves lives by preserving an exit route, which can be extremely important with young or old people who may need more time to escape. In addition, fire records show that 93 percent of all fires are

handled by only one sprinkler.⁵ Paul Valentine, the fire marshal in Mt. Prospect, states, "Smoke detectors are great, but occupant survivability is 50 percent with smoke detectors and 97 percent with smoke detectors and sprinklers both in the house."⁶

Proponents of the residential sprinkler requirement support their

To help alleviate some of the financial burden of complying with these ordinances, Mayor Daley is supporting federal and state tax breaks, property tax exemptions, and relaxing the building code requirements to make installation cheaper.

position by pointing out the benefits of sprinklers in high-rise buildings, such as the lives saved and the reduction in insurance premiums. Although the cost of installing the sprinklers may be high, it will produce other savings. Buildings with fire sprinklers will no longer be considered high-risk, which can save building owners 20 to 60 percent on insurance premiums, and each individual unit tenant or owner may have a reduction of 5 to 20 percent on their own policies. In addition, in many of these residential high-rise buildings, the infrastructure is already in place, such as existing water mains, fire pumps, and stairwell standpipes that can be used to facilitate installation.⁷

Opponents of the residential sprinkler requirement primarily oppose the measure due to the cost of compliance. Although there are incentives and tax breaks that would help

defray the cost of compliance, The Building Owners and Managers Association of Chicago fear that, even with financial assistance, compliance with the ordinance could be devastating, causing some buildings to suffer mortgage default, demolition or conversion to other uses.⁸

The Attainable Housing Alliance ("AHA"), an organization that works to keep homeownership affordable for all, also opposes the residential sprinkler requirement, arguing that the associated costs will make homeownership impossible for many. Rather than requiring residential fire sprinklers, the AHA prefers a plan that would make sprinklers an available option, rather than a requirement. "Losing one life is too many," says Colin McRae, CEO of the AHA, "but let's face it, 40,000 people are killed in cars every year and we don't make people drive tanks so they don't get crushed in cars."

Although Mayor Daley's less costly plan seems to have more votes in the City Council, Alderman Burke's plan has the vocal support of fire survivors and victims' families. While it seems all but certain that commercial buildings will be required to install sprinklers, the fate of the residential requirement remains to be seen.

1. Changes for Safety, Chi. Trib., Nov. 5, 2003; 2003 WL 67354480

2. Home Fire Safety Coalition, <http://www.homefiresprinkler.org/hfsc.html> (Mar. 9, 2004)

3. Fran Spielman, Old High-Rises to Get Deadline for Sprinklers: But Condos to be Exempt From Costly Fixes in Mayor's Plan, Chi. Sun Times, Nov. 5, 2003, 2003 WL 9573545

4. Press Release, Mayor Richard M. Daley's Press Office, Daley Seeks Tougher Fire Code to Protect High-Rise Occupants (Nov. 5, 2003)

5. Residential Fire Safety Institute, <http://www.firesafe-home.org/sprinklers/firesprinklers.asp> (Mar. 9, 2004)

6. Dennis Rodkin, The Debate Over Home Sprinklers, Chi. Trib., Oct. 26, 2003, § 16, at 1

7. Sprinkler Ordinances Protect High-Rise Residents, Chi. Trib., Feb. 26, 2004, 2004 WL 71393360

8. Sprinkler Costs and Benefits, Chi. Trib., Feb. 5, 2004; 2004 WL 67383549