

## 30 seconds by Larry Matkaitis

A fire doubles in size every 30 seconds.

If you could do something to stop a fire from spreading in your home within those critical seconds, wouldn't you?

Residential fire sprinklers do this. Within seconds of activation, one sprinkler can douse dangerous flames that block exits and jeopardize the safety of anyone trapped inside. A sprinkler can save your life, the life of your family and the lives of the first responders who come to save you. It can also save things that can never be replaced with insurance, like photos and family heirlooms.

When many of us go to work, the movies, shopping malls, airports and arenas, we find sprinklers. Why? Because they save lives and reduce damage. It's an obvious decision for businesses that need to protect their investments.

Why shouldn't you have them where you live and sleep?

The biggest investment most people buy in their life time is a house.

Since 2007, property loss in Illinois residential occupancy fires has exceeded \$1.7 billion. These same residential fires have led to more than 600 citizen deaths, 34 firefighter deaths and over 6,000 citizen and firefighter injuries. The scary truth is that more than 80% of fire deaths in Illinois occur where people feel safest – their homes.

By setting a requirement for newly constructed homes to be protected by automatic sprinklers, eventually over time, all Illinois residents will enjoy enhanced fire safety in their homes.

Some argue that a sprinkler requirement in new single-family homes is not worth the price. While there is a cost associated with installing these safety devices (\$1.35/sq. ft.), there are also enormous benefits. Sprinklers can activate mere seconds after a fire starts, dramatically reducing smoke and damage compared to a fire that burns uncontrolled and possibly unreported for several minutes. Changes in construction materials over the last 25 years cause new homes to burn hotter and faster than old homes, so every second counts.

The cost of sprinklers in newly constructed homes can be rolled into long-term mortgages and do not have to be borne up-front by home buyers. A house of 2000 square feet with a sprinkler system installed at a \$1.35 a square foot, or \$2700 total, averaged over 30 years comes out to \$7.50 a month. Affordable? I think so.

Owners of single-family homes with sprinklers can also enjoy reduced insurance premiums between 10-20% a year because of the potential reduction in fire damage.

Some will say that installing smoke detectors in a home protects them enough. Compared to reported home fires with no fire protection, the death rate per 1,000 reported fires is 31% lower when hardwired smoke alarms are installed. The rate is 83% lower when both hardwired smoke alarms and a sprinkler system are present. That's a 50% better survival rate.

Sprinklers have proven to save lives and reduce property damage. A 15-year study in Prince George's County, Maryland found that **not a single life** was lost in sprinklered homes compared to 101 deaths in unsprinklered homes. In Scottsdale, Arizona, where residential sprinklers have long been required, the average cost of fire damage is nearly 20 times greater in unsprinklered residences than in sprinkler protected homes.

There was a time when seatbelts and airbags were criticized for being costly and nuisances, but over the years, all the lives they've saved speak for themselves. Even if the law did not require seatbelts and air bags, most people wouldn't consider buying a vehicle today without them. It is my hope that residential sprinklers will enjoy the same acceptance in years to come.

People tend to believe that fire is something that "happens to the other guy" – until it happens to them.

My office has compiled information and videos about this measure on our website: [www.sfm.illinois.gov](http://www.sfm.illinois.gov).

I encourage you to visit the site to learn the facts regarding the proposed code update and to dispel myths that exist regarding residential fire sprinklers.

I've dedicated 39 years to saving lives and my goal is to make Illinois the most fire safe state in the country. We know that of the 120 fire deaths Illinois had last year, approximately 100 could be alive today if they had sprinklers in their homes.

They could save you, your family, and your property,

Be smart and fire safe.

Larry Matkaitis is the Illinois State Fire Marshal.