



Kingman County Commission

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Preparation key to winter fire safety

Cold weather has arrived and that means furnaces and other home heating devices are back in use for perhaps the first time in months.

Heating fires are the second leading cause of home fires, according to the U.S. Fire Administration. The American Red Cross reports that fires kill more Americans each year than all natural disasters combined. South central Kansas has recorded several fire-related fatalities this year, including a fire Nov. 26 in Wichita that killed two adults and two children.

Being aware of winter-related and basic fire prevention steps can keep your family safe and warm, said Fred Simon, Kingman County director of emergency management. Simon offered the following tips.

Furnace, space heaters. Get your furnace checked by a professional to ensure it is in good working condition. If using alternative heating sources, follow all manufacturers' guidelines. Space heaters should have been evaluated by a nationally recognized laboratory, such as Underwriters Laboratories (UL). Only use extension cords that have the necessary rating to carry the amp load (hint: choose an extension cord the same size or larger than the appliance's cord).

Check to see that the heater will switch off automatically if it falls over. Avoid using it in small spaces such as bathrooms where it may come in contact with water. Keep combustibles and children at least three feet away and never use a space heater to thaw frozen pipes in a confined space. Instead, use hot water or a device such as a handheld dryer.

Wood stove, fireplace safety. Be sure your wood burning stove is installed with adequate clearance. Burn your stove hot twice a day for 15-30 minutes to reduce the amount of creosote buildup. Never use flammable liquids to start or accelerate a fire.

Keep a glass or metal screen in front of a fireplace opening to prevent embers or sparks from getting out or unwanted material getting in. Don't use excessive amounts of paper to build roaring fireplace fires, which could ignite creosote in the chimney. Have your chimney inspected annually.

Never close the damper with hot ashes in the fireplace; the ashes can reheat and force toxic carbon monoxide into the house. Always dispose of cooled ashes in a metal container placed well away from the house.

Other heating sources. Never use a range or oven as a heating device; both can be sources of potentially toxic fumes. Never leave cooking unattended and keep an especially close eye on children when cooking, making sure they stay well away from hot devices. Never leave burning candles unattended.

General safety tips. Be sure every level of your home has a working smoke detector and change batteries twice a year. You may want to consider purchasing a dual sensor smoke alarm, which sounds for both a fire with flames and a smoky fire with fumes but no flames. The Norwich Fire Department offers free smoke detector checks.

Have a plan. The Red Cross reports that only 26 percent of families have developed and practiced a home fire escape plan. Get a plan and practice it. If your plan uses windows, be sure they open easily. Home escape ladders are recommended and make sure everyone knows at least two escape routes from bedrooms.

Fire spreads quickly. In just two minutes, a fire can become life-threatening. In five minutes, a residence can be engulfed, reports the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA).

“Prevention now can make all the difference in case of a fire,” Simon said. “Having working smoke detectors and an escape plan can help keep your family safe this winter.”

If you have any questions about fire prevention or safety, contact your local fire department. You also may contact Simon at (620) 532-5081.

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