

Department of Human Services

Information Bulletin

To: Providers, Families, the People We Serve and Others

Date: March 22, 2007

Subject: Fire Safety and Prevention



With the goal of keeping the Division's partners and the people it serves informed about issues crucial to the health, welfare, and safety of the people we serve, we are issuing this information bulletin and other documents on fires, a potentially life threatening risk. We thank you in advance for your efforts to improve management of this life-threatening risk.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Kenneth W. Ritchey in black ink.

Kenneth W. Ritchey, Assistant Commissioner
Division of Developmental Disabilities

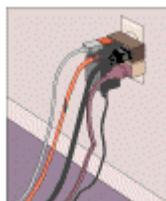
Handwritten signature of Gerald Suozzo in black ink.

Gerald Suozzo, Director
Office of Program Integrity and
Accountability



Fires are a potentially fatal hazard for everybody, but especially for people with developmental disabilities and traumatic brain injury who may depend on others for evacuation in the event of a fire. On November 27, 2006, ten residents and one staff died in a fire in a group home for the mentally disabled in Missouri. Seventeen others were hospitalized. A review of reports on fires in New Jersey indicates more must be done to reduce this risk to the people we serve.

The prevention of many, but not all, fires is under the influence and control of the people who reside, operate, or participate in community programs. The incidence of fires related to cooking, clothes drying, misuse of electrical equipment, and smoking can be greatly reduced by taking preventative action.



However, since some fires are attributable to both unmanageable and unexpected causes, the people involved must be prepared to respond properly and promptly. This means that Direct Care Professionals and the people they serve need to practice fire evacuation drills sufficiently often to ensure the best possible response in the event of an actual fire. Evacuation in the event of a fire is the first action to take.



The absence of fatalities and serious injuries with the fires over the last two years is due in many cases to the prompt action of Direct Support Professionals, functioning alarm systems, and good fortune. The actions by Direct Support Professionals to promptly evacuate people should be applauded.

However, smoke alarms only reduce the frequency of fire-related injuries and fatalities by prompting evacuation. But, **Smoke Alarms Do Not Prevent Fires.** The National Fire Data Center of the United States Department of Homeland Security indicates that smoke alarms were “present and operated” in 23% of fatal residential fires.



Improving fire safety results from increased efforts in three main areas:

- On-going Executive Commitment and Administrative Oversight.
- Training of Direct Support Professionals and individuals receiving services in evacuation and fire safety;
- Setting up and maintaining a fire-safe physical environment.

Executive Directors and Administrators must demonstrate their commitment to fire safety by developing policies, procedure, and practices that enhance fire safety; by visiting their programs periodically to model the use of safety checklists and by conducting and participating in fire drills; and assuring that both staff and individuals they serve are trained and prepared to prevent and properly respond to fire emergencies.

The licensing standards for Community Residences for Persons with Developmental Disabilities (N.J.A.C. 10:44A), for Community Care Residences (N.J.A.C. 10:44B), and for Persons with Head Injuries (N.J.A.C. 10:44C) have sections on fire safety, including requirements for smoke and/or fire **alarms**, fire **evacuation planning**, and fire **drills**. In addition the Standards for Adult Day Programs also have a section on fire safety.

Vigorous adherence to the requirements of the licensing and day program standards will enhance the level of fire safety provided to the people we serve.

Developmental Disabilities Licensing has also developed a “Checklist for Safety throughout the Residence.” The Checklist is posted on the Division/Department’s Website at <http://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/ddd/safety.html> or can be viewed here: [Checklist for Safety throughout the Residence.](#)

At a minimum, this checklist or a more thorough instrument should be completed on a monthly basis in all programs and residences in which people with developmental disabilities or traumatic brain injuries participate. Hazards identified on a completed checklist must be immediately resolved.

Periodically, the Office of Program Integrity and Accountability will be publishing on the Division/Department’s website statistics about fires so we can all monitor the progress we are making in minimizing the risk of fires to the people we serve.

Additional information on fire safety is available at the following websites:

NFPA.org – The National Fire Protection Association

www.firesafety.gov - FireSafety.gov is sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and the U.S. Fire Association.

www.usfa.dhs.gov - The United States Fire Association

[firesafety - Info.com](http://firesafety-info.com) - References multiple website addresses on fire safety