

Number of serious fires down in township

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Middletown officials attribute an aggressive prevention program and fire education.

Middletown has had its share of serious fires over the years. But one, in particular, sent the township's fire marshal into prevention mode overdrive.

In March 2005, a woman was found burning on a front lawn after her clothing ignited while she leaned over a candle. She died from third-degree burns over 50 percent of her body.

That's when Fire Marshal Jim McGuire and his staff made it their mission to lower the number of fires in the township. They needed to educate residents to accomplish that goal.

McGuire said the program works. Last year, Middletown firefighters didn't battle any major fires, which he defined as those which totally destroy a building or leave one uninhabitable.

But that streak ended last week with a fire on Longview Avenue that left the homeowners temporarily without shelter.

Although 270 fires in the township were investigated in 2009, basically the same amount as 2008, McGuire's office said the big difference was the severity of those fires.

The year without a major fire was a first for the township, which covers 19.4 square miles and has a population of 45,000 residents, Middletown records show.

County-wide, there are no numbers to compare with Middletown, said Bucks County Fire Marshal Nick Rafferty.

"Our numbers do not reflect all the fires, they merely reflect the investigations we do. We don't do investigations in the larger municipalities like Middletown unless called in. We normally do inspections in the upper end of the county in places like Haycock and Plumsteadville," Rafferty said.

Rafferty said his office investigated 110 fires in 2009 and 91 in 2008.

"Middletown is certainly doing a great job of promoting fire prevention," he said. "I applaud them. Middletown has been willing to step up and have an aggressive fire prevention program and their numbers don't lie."

McGuire calls his plan "After the Fire," which involves many programs, including free fire inspections to homeowners, and 52 different brochures related to various aspects of fire safety.

McGuire has firefighters walk through a neighborhood after a fire occurs nearby to hand out prevention materials and check and replace smoke detectors.

Firefighters walked the streets of Highland Park recently, following two fires in as many days at the same home on Hawk Road. In both fires, a smoke detector sounded and there were no injuries or major property damage, McGuire said.

Education really helps, he said. That's why he sets up fire prevention information tables at block parties and other events. Residents aren't the only ones being educated, he said. His four inspectors get advanced training, too, he said.

McGuire said his office is hard, but fair when it comes to code enforcement for businesses. Specifically, all businesses, no matter how big or small, must adhere to one code, of which there is no interpretation, McGuire said.

Sometimes a business has a sprinkler system, so the owner questions the need for an alarm system, McGuire said. But the codes state all businesses must have a fire alarm system to give early warning to all inside.

Other programs developed by his office include chimney inspections for just-sold properties and fire extinguisher training in the schools.

Every Carl Sandburg Middle School student learns the proper handling of a fire extinguisher before leaving for high school, McGuire said. McGuire has offered this course to all Neshaminy schools, but only Sandburg officials requested it, he said.

"We've had this program for a while and it uses a computer-operated machine with propane that makes a real fire. We've trained numerous people how to use it. In less than a year, two homeowners called my office to tell us they successfully put out a fire with an extinguisher and never called the fire department. We recommend you call the fire department, but in these two cases it worked," he said.

"We try to find new and creative ways to preach fire prevention and get out in the community. Most everything we do is free to our residents so we urge them to take advantage of our programs," he said.

That fire extinguisher program was seen in action Tuesday at Carl Sandburg.

About 30 eighth-graders took turns putting out flames on a simulated kitchen stove. They were taken up to the fire by Middletown Fire Inspector Ken Richards, who taught them the PASS system. "Pull, Aim, Squeeze and Sweep," the proper way to use an extinguisher.

"It was fun," said student George Gutherman. "I never did this before, but think I would be able to put a fire out in my house."

Another student, Charneese Saunders, said she had experienced a fire in her home. So she took two turns with the extinguisher.

"We had a fire in our home about two years ago. (Using the extinguisher) was easy. I saw it done before and my parents saved our house with fire extinguishers," she said.

McGuire offers tips to adults, too.

One for homeowners is: "Exercise" the circuit breakers in your house. Doing so could prevent serious damage down the road.

"We recommend flipping the breakers back and forth every six months. This lessens the chance of damage during a lightning strike or power surge," McGuire said.

Another tip is to wet cigarette butts before tossing them in a trash can.

Cigarette fires cause about 1,000 deaths and 3,000 injuries annually, according to the National Fire Protection Association, based in Quincy, Mass.

Careless cooking is another major cause of house fires, he said. Remember to never place anything on a stove you don't want to heat, he warned.

An electrical coil on a stovetop reaches 800 degrees, while a gas flame exceeds 1,000 degrees. Dish towels and pot holders ignite at 400 degrees, McGuire said.

Although McGuire has not experienced too many fires with portable heating devices, he warns homeowners to follow all the manufacturer's specifications. Be sure the item is UL listed, which stands for Underwriters Laboratories.

"We don't see the problems we had in past years with space heaters because they are of higher quality now and some have tip-over protection, meaning if they get knocked over, they shut off instantly," McGuire said.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that more than 25,000 residential fires annually are associated with space heaters. More than 300 people die in those fires and 6,000 more are treated at hospitals.

McGuire hopes none are in Middletown's future.

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