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## **Cold weather can bring fire and carbon monoxide dangers**

The current cold weather means many residents are heating their homes for the first time this winter, and Sarasota County fire officials are reminding residents to use caution when it comes to operating heating devices such as space heaters, fireplaces and wood stoves.

According to the National Fire Prevention Association, heaters are the leading cause of home fires during the winter months. In 2007, fire departments throughout the country responded to more than 64,000 heating equipment-related home fires, which accounted for 640 deaths, 1,550 injuries and over \$909 million in property damage. These home fires involved space heaters, wood stoves, fireplaces, portable kerosene heaters and room gas heaters.

“These fires don’t have to happen,” said Sarasota County Fire Chief Kenneth Ellerbe. “Most fires with space heaters are preventable if key safety measures are followed.”

To avoid problems, keep space heaters at least three feet away from anything that can burn, including furnishings, bedding and clothing. Turn the heater off when you leave the room or go to sleep. Wood stoves, fireplaces and chimneys should always be installed by a qualified technician. Annual checks by a qualified technician are recommended, since many fires in wood stoves, fireplaces and chimneys occur because of a lack of regular cleaning.

Use only seasoned hardwood in wood stoves and fireplaces, and don’t burn trash in a fireplace because the fire could easily burn out of control. Keep sparks and embers inside the fireplace with fire screens made of heat-tempered glass or sturdy metal. Also, heating equipment that burns fuel is a potential source of carbon monoxide (CO), an odorless, colorless and poisonous gas that is created when fuel burns incompletely. Fire officials recommend installing CO alarms to provide an early warning of this deadly gas.

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, space (or room) heaters cause more than 25,000 residential fires every year, resulting in more than 300 fatalities and 6,000 injuries severe enough to require hospital treatment.

For more information, contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 and ask for the Fire Department Fire Prevention unit.

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